FIGHT 'EM, BIG THREE

HAROLD M. SHERMAN

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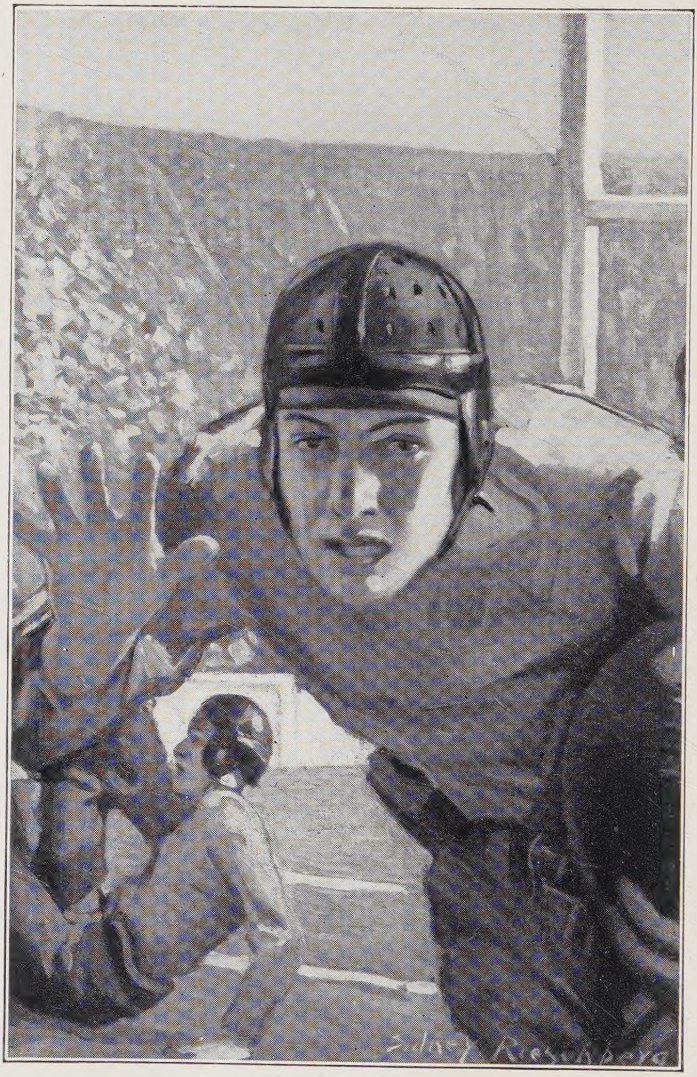

BRICK SHOT SAVAGELY AGAINST THE REEDLAND LINE

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FIGHT 'EM, BIG THREE

BY

HAROLD M. SHERMAN

AUTHOR OF

MAYFIELD'S FIGHTING FIVE,
GET 'EM, MAYFIELD, ETC.

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THIS STORY IS LOVINGLY DEDICATED TO

MISS CLARA N. BATES,

WHOSE EARLY INTEREST AND FAITH IN A BOY WHO ASPIRED TO WRITE FOR BOYS, IS HUMBLY APPRECIATED.

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FIGHT 'EM, BIG THREE

CHAPTER I

THE THREE "BICYCLEERS"

"THE special meeting of the committee of three to decide what we're going to do in the few days we've got left of this summer vacation is now called to order," announced Stuffy Owen, sitting with much assumed authority on the door step of the Mitchell home, the other two members of the committee perched on the step below him.

"Listen to the self-appointed chairman!" sniffed Pepper Lawton with pretended disdain.

"Yes, who is *he* to think he can call a committee of anything?" kidded Brick Mitchell.

"It's my position," explained Stuffy. "Being above you I quite naturally have the authority to . . ."

Two pairs of hands reached out and grabbed the would-be chairman's ankles. There was a sliding

slap as Stuffy bumped down a step to the same level occupied by his chums.

"S-say! Go easy. These steps are hard as the dickens!"

"Well, then, cut out that king stuff!"

Stuffy shot a painful look at his rebellious companions.

"Some one's gotta be king. You fellahs have been arguing here for the last half hour."

"That's all right. We like to argue," said Pepper, defensively. "It improves our logic."

"Bah!" snorted Stuffy, contemptuously. "If you don't hurry up and decide something pretty soon this summer vacation will be over. I don't call that logic!"

"You're too impatient, that's all that's the matter with you," said Brick, giving his chum a playful thump. "You know right well we've just as good as decided to go camping near Red Glow Lake. The only thing we're harping about is the ways and means of getting there!"

"And I've told you fellows a hundred times that I thought I could get my Dad's car for the trip," put in Pepper.

"Yeah, and what's the fun of taking a car on a camping trip?" objected Stuffy. "Pretty soon you'll

be wanting to carry along a rocking chair and a feather mattress. My idea of a camping trip is something that requires a little locomotion on your own part."

The two chums looked at Stuffy with serious consideration.

"Well,—go on. Elucidate!" commanded Brick. "What kind of locomotion would you suggest?"

"Ah, now that brings me to the point!" smiled Stuffy, rubbing his hands. "What do you say to . . . to bicycles?"

"Bicycles!"

"Sure. Wheels. One in front and one in back. Pedals and handle-bars and everything!"

"Go on. You're crazy. Red Glow Lake's two hundred and seventy miles from here. Think we're going to bike it that far?"

"Why not?" insisted Stuffy. "We haven't really roughed it all summer and if we're going out for football our first year in high school we'd better get busy building up some endurance. Besides, you can get lots of places with a bike that you can't ever reach with an automobile. We're bound to have more fun!"

Pepper and Brick exchanged consulting glances.

"I suppose the old boy's right as usual," agreed

Pepper finally, "pedaling a bike ought to put lots of strength in our legs so we can drive through the line. . . ."

"Or kick the pigskin lobsided," added Stuffy.

"I'm rather inclined to second brother Owen's motion," said Brick.

"The only trouble is," objected Pepper, "My old velocipede needs a couple of new tires and a general overhauling."

"It 'ud only take a day to get our wheels in shape," urged Stuffy, "and in the meantime we can be figuring out our route and what we're going to take with us and about where we're going to strike camp."

"Motion has been made and seconded . . . duly seconded," recited Pepper in mocking tones, "that we go camping near Red Glow Lake and that we make the trip on our trusty bicycles. All those in favor will kindly signify by saying 'aye.' "

"Aye!" from Stuffy and Brick in loud-lunged fashion.

"Those opposed?"

Not a sound.

"Motion appears to be carried," pronounced Pepper. "The meeting is now thrown open to an

informal discussion as to the preparations deemed necessary for the camping trip."

A good hour passed as good hours do but at the end of that time the three chums arose with their plans completed. They were to start from Milford at five o'clock in the morning of the second day following and make the trip to Red Glow Lake in five days' time, dividing the journey up into laps of approximately fifty-five miles a day. As nearly as they could determine, a good part of the traveling would be over the state highway and this would enable them to make fairly good speed.

After some discussion it was decided to take a minimum of camp equipment. Stuffy was to bring along a large spread of tarpaulin which they were to use as a covering in case of bad weather; Pepper was to supply the few cooking utensils; Brick was to look after the eats, and all of them were to carry such essentials as a hatchet, knife and canteen. A woolen blanket for each, fishpoles and fishing tackle and Stuffy's rifle rounded out the more important pieces of camp equipment.

"I'm not much on hunting wild game," explained Stuffy after announcing that he was taking his gun along, "because I somehow have an idea that wild game likes to live as well as we do. But I sure would

like to tear the bulls' eyes out of several targets!"

"Huh!" taunted Brick. "You a sharp-shooter? You couldn't hit the bull's eye of any target unless you put your gun right up against it. Remember last fall when you shot at the tin can on the fence post . . . ?"

"And shot the weathercock off the top of old Dwiggins' barn instead?" finished Pepper. "No, Stuffy, if you're taking your rifle along for yourself you'd better leave it behind!"

"I suppose I'll never hear the last of that," admitted Stuffy. "Just because I changed my shot and aimed at the weathercock instead of the tin can, without telling you fellows about it, you've always tried to make out that I was a bum marksman."

This remark was greeted with shrieks of laughter.

"Always got a come-back, haven't you?" jabbed Brick. "Good old Stuffy!"

School vacation was whizzing into its last three weeks. Whizzing was the proper word. This period of time, to the three chums, was but a few days. It had seemed but yesterday since they had matriculated from the eighth grade with handsomely engraved diplomas bound by ribbons of green and white, testifying to their eligibility for entrance into

the higher regions of learning as represented by Milford High.

Stuffy, Pepper and Brick had long looked forward to the day when they might be enrolled as high school students. It had been fun attending the grades, of course, but the grades hadn't really amounted to much beyond the filling of certain brain cells with certain knowledge and preparing other empty brain cells to receive the further knowledge that a high school had to offer. Besides, in their observation, those older boys and girls who attended high school appeared to be able to do so many more things than grade school pupils. At least folks made more ado over activities in high school. Why, last spring, when Stuffy, Pepper and Brick had played on the champion eighth grade baseball nine, there had been but a handful of Milford townsfolk out to see the team play. But if the team had belonged to Milford High the whole town and most of the county would have been on deck. Nope! Until a fellow got into high school he didn't cut much bait with a community. Thank goodness their days in the grades were over!

The morning that the boys were to start out on their camping trip dawned with a cloudless sky . . . an ideal day except that it gave indication of being

scorchingly hot. A few minutes before five, two figures clad in gray slip-over sweaters with V-necks, khaki cotton knickerbockers, a khaki service hat and tan shoes, pedaled quietly up the deserted street, dismounting in front of the Mitchell home and emitting low whistles. Presently they were joined by another figure, dressed precisely the same, who greeted them with restrained boisterousness as if afraid of disturbing the still sleeping community.

"Right on time to the dot!" said Stuffy. "But you were thirty seconds late coming out of the house. What in the world detained you?"

"What's the matter, Stuff? Get up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?" kidded Brick in return. "Gee, guys, isn't this a large morning!"

"A regular humdinger!" agreed Pepper enthusiastically. "Let's go!"

"Who takes the lead?"

"Aw, let Stuffy. He can't hold it anyway."

"Is that so? I'll show you fellahs a few tricks about bicycle riding that you didn't think you'd ever see. I'll wait for you when I get to Newberry. She's only fifty-eight miles. Good-by!"

Stuffy was off. He was quickly followed by Pepper and Brick in the order named. The three pedaled evenly and swiftly over the paved streets of

Milford with the roadway practically barren of traffic. At one corner the boys encountered a milk wagon and the driver called merrily after them, "Bon voyage!"

"He thinks we're getting along swimmingly," shouted back Stuffy.

Occasional early risers waved at the trio on bicycles as they skimmed toward the town limits of Milford and the state highway. The boys made a novel spectacle, outfitted as they were. And perhaps those who glimpsed them were just a bit envious that they could not have been in their shoes.

"Now look out!" warned Stuffy as he hit the concrete highway and increased his speed. The bicycle leaped ahead like a scared rabbit and the wheels hummed as they sung around. But, clinging close to Stuffy's rear tire were other spinning wheels. Stuffy kept up his grinding pace for half an hour before he so much as looked back.

"We're still with you, old pace-maker," grinned Pepper.

"Pace? I haven't begun to set a pace yet. I'm just getting the kinks out of my legs," sniffed Stuffy.

"Pardon me . . . my mistake," said Pepper, turning to wink at Brick. "Well, let us know when you decide to shake us, will you?"

On either side of the gliding cyclists, cultivated fields, patches of woods and farm buildings flashed by. The morning air was fresh with the fragrance of dew on meadow grass and the sweet odor of clover. There were signs of activity about the farm yards but little traffic on the highway as yet.

As the morning wore on, the sun kept mounting in the sky and beaming down with warmer and warmer amusement upon the three pairs of legs which worked so furiously to keep up with one another. About ten o'clock the speeding procession came to its first halt.

"Whzzzzzzz! Bang!"

Stuffy's rear tire went suddenly flat and the rim began to bump over the hard roadbed. Stuffy jammed on his brake and dismounted as quickly as he could. Pepper and Brick swerved to avoid running into him.

"Well, what do you know about that!" said Stuffy, soaking wet with perspiration and secretly glad of a chance to rest. "Just when I'd started to let myself out, too. It's lucky for you fellows that this happened."

"Yes, or you'd have been in Newberry by this time," guyed Brick. "She's only twenty-two more miles."

Stuffy made no reply to this but spun his tire about, looking for the puncture.

"Aha! A three-cornered stone. Of course I'd have to pick it up."

Stuffy dug the stone out of the tire.

"A tube of Never-leak will fix that!"

"Say, isn't the sun hot?" asked Pepper. "We're dressed entirely too warm. I move we strip down to our flannel shirts at least. I'm nearly baked!"

"And not try to make the whole trip in one day," emphasized Brick, with a glance at Stuffy. "You ought to know by now that you can't lose us so there's no use of your trying to burn up your tires. We're away ahead of our schedule."

Stuffy, in the act of pumping up his tire, grinned sheepishly.

"Aren't we the three bicycleers, though?" he said, softly. "We manage to stick together in everything we do. And I did think I could give you fellahs my dust when it came to riding a bicycle!"

Newberry was reached shortly before five. It was a little place of about seven hundred population and the boys stopped just long enough to enjoy some ice-cream at the only soda fountain while the village "hangabouts" looked on curiously.

"Gee, I was thirsty as a camel!" exclaimed Brick,

cleaning out his dish of cream and finishing his second glass of water.

"A camel?" echoed Stuffy, well on his way to consuming the third order of ice-cream. "Ten camels!"

"Shouldn't wonder," joshed Pepper. "You worked ten times as hard getting the same distance as we did."

"Where'd you boys come from to-day?" asked one of the bystanders.

Stuffy elected to answer. He straightened up on the soda fountain stool importantly.

"All the way from Milford," he said. "Fifty eight miles!"

"How long you been comin'?"

"Since five this morning."

"Since five this mornin'! What did you do—walk?"

"Walk, my eye!" snorted Stuffy. "Didn't you see our bicycles outside?"

"Sure, but I was beginnin' to think you must of carried them," rejoined the villager, dryly.

"Well, it felt like it at times," admitted Stuffy. "You see this is our first day out. We're tenderfoots yet. We broke the world's record for the first twenty miles. At least it seemed like we broke something. After that we just took our time. I

told the boys it was no use of us killing ourselves just because we like exercise. . . ."

Stuffy gave a sidewise wink at Pepper and Brick who were just about to protest.

"And now that we've been refreshed, we must be moving on. You don't happen to know of some good place about three miles out where we could stop and camp, do you?" he asked of the store lounger.

"Bet I do!" came the ready answer. "Why don't you boys stop at the Tourists' Camp? Free parking space there and free air!"

The villagers laughed heartily at this suggestion by one of their number. They were pleased at the thought that, when it came to repartee, the out-of-town youths could be held even. Guess there were folks in Newberry who were just as smart and witty as folks anywhere else!

Stuffy, contrary to expectations, accepted the humorous advice in all sobriety. He slid off his stool and motioned to his two companions. They mounted their wheels silently while the villagers looked on. As they started off, Stuffy lifted his hat and grinned.

"You're all right, Newberry!" he called back. And when they were out of sight, on the highway again, he said, in a low voice to his chums, "You

guys'll never believe this but I had the wisest crack of my life all saved up to spring on that town wit . . . but I just didn't have the heart to take the wind out of his sails. Didn't he think he set me down pretty?"

The first four days of the trip passed without unusual incident. The "bicycleers," as Stuffy had dubbed them, were favored with good weather and good roads. They made their scheduled distances with comparative ease; camped not far from the highway, rolling up in blankets and sleeping on the ground; every night finding them in surroundings which hinted more and more of the unbroken forests and wild country to come.

It was on the afternoon of the fifth day that the cyclists pulled into Jamesville, the last settlement through which they would pass on their journey to Red Glow Lake. What there was of Jamesville was clustered along the state highway which became the Main Street for a few hundred yards and sported, among other buildings, the general store and post office combined, the Piper blacksmith shop, the Blue Streak Lodging House and Light Lunch Place, the All Settlers Church and Town Meeting Hall, and the Saturday Night Picture Palace.

"Some burg, this is!" chuckled Pepper, as he took the village in at a glance. "Too bad it isn't Saturday so we could see the show before we leave the last traces of civilization behind!"

"Can't you find enough amusement in camping?" chided Stuffy. "I thought we'd never get you out of Rock Valley. You went goofy over that bill poster that was advertising 'The Great Train Robbery.' Come on, Diamond Dick. We've got some provisions to buy before we take to the woods!"

Nineteen miles from Jamesville and three miles off the state highway, Red Glow Lake calmly awaited the arrival of the three "bicycleers." It was calm only because there was not the slightest breeze blowing. The late afternoon was sulky and still with the threat of a storm in clouds which were slowly piling over the western horizon, blotting out the setting sun.

At a turn in the highway, above a bluff which towered on either side of the W. & G. railroad tracks, the chums dismounted and looked for a break in the thick underbrush and trees which lined the road . . . a break sufficient to permit the carrying of their wheels. They were some time finding such an avenue of approach to the lake, wandering

up the highway for a quarter of a mile before a cry from Brick finally announced success.

"Here's a path, fellows!"

"Gee, it looks like it was made to order!" exclaimed Stuffy when he saw it. "I'll bet she goes clear to the lake, too. And she's hard enough under foot so we can even ride our bikes. Such luck!"

Now that the five days' trip was almost at an end, the three chums could hardly wait to reach old Red Glow. They were all yearning for a plunge in its crystal clear waters and for the building of a little camp site from driftwood to be found along the shore. The footpath was so narrow that low-hanging branches whipped the boys in the face as they pedaled and it was necessary for them to bend close to the handle-bars at times as they passed under branches. Once in the forest the last rays of the departing sun were cut off from them and they had to call upon the light from their spotlights, with which each wheel was equipped, in order to see their way.

"Oh, boy!" sang out Pepper. "This sure is the life!"

"A lot better than riding over that hot strip of concrete for miles and miles," agreed Stuffy. "Look out for that branch. She's a mean one!"

The winding path suddenly, and without warning, veered into a little clearing so that the riders were greeted with a last remaining burst of daylight.

"Hello! What's this?" cried Brick, jumping from his wheel. Stuffy and Pepper leaped to the ground and trundled their bicycles ahead of them, wonderingly.

Not one hundred feet in front stood a small one-story house and behind it, a ramshackle structure which, at one time, might have passed for a barn!

It was a good moment before the three chums could recover from their astonishment. The last evidence they had seen of life was a house seven miles back on the state highway . . . a house which the boys had noted, enjoyed the very great luxury of a telephone. But to run upon such a place, hidden from the road by a good half mile of dense forest and apparently approachable only from the path over which they had come—well, it was interesting to say the least!

"What was it you warbled about getting away from civilization?" said Stuffy to Pepper in a tone indicating disappointment. "It can't be done. The whole darn world's civilized. I'll bet we'll find real estate signs stuck up all along the edge of the lake!"

"I don't believe these shacks have been here long," said Pepper. "Everything looks fairly new. Probably some sportsman or resorter. . . ."

Pepper was interrupted by the sound of the barn door creaking open and presently the appearance of a short, thickset man—roughly dressed—who started as if shocked at the sight of the cycling trio. He walked toward them slowly.

"Howdy, boys! Watcha doin' out here?"

The stranger's voice was none too pleasant. His eyes roamed inquiringly over each youth and the equipment they carried.

"We're on our way to the lake," Stuffy explained, again making himself the spokesman of the party.

"How'd you happen to come this way?" The question was snapped out bluntly.

"Why . . . we just stumbled on the path and we knew it was headed in the right direction so we started off on it," answered Stuffy, honestly.

"What do you think you're goin' to do at the lake?" asked the man, harshly.

"Camp, of course!" replied Stuffy, a bit irritated by the stranger's persistence.

"S'pose you didn't figure on this bein' privately owned property?"

"No, sir." Stuffy met the stranger's eyes with-

out a flicker. "It isn't, according to the state map."

The short, thickset man laughed, a slurring sort of laugh.

"You can't tell nothin' by no map."

"We didn't see any 'keep off' signs," protested Pepper, not able to restrain himself longer.

"We ain't ever needed none. You're the first birds that has ever busted in here."

"Well, you don't own the lake, do you?" asked Stuffy, stepping as if to pass by. "We didn't intend to stop here anyway and we certainly won't come back this way if that's the way you feel about it!"

The stranger laid a hand on the handle-bar.

"Now don't give me none of your lip, young fellow. Just trot along back the same way you come. That goes for your partners, too. Beat it now, before I gets rough!"

The three chums hesitated. It was growing dark. They had wanted to reach the lake ahead of the dusk. As they stood, looking at the glowering countenance of the threatening stranger, there came to the ears of all a low muttering rumble.

"Thunder!" spoke Pepper, in an undertone to Stuffy. "We're due for a good storm. It's been so dry lately. What'll we do, rush this old boy or double back on our tracks?"

"Double back," advised Stuffy. "No use starting anything . . . yet."

The boys turned their wheels about, snapped on the spotlights and made for the path. The stranger walked to the edge of the clearing with them.

"You birds'll have better health if you skin out of this neck of the woods altogether," the stranger warned, as a parting shot. "I'm in charge of all this country through here and I got orders to chase off all trespassers. I don't want to lay my peppers on you again. Get me?"

The low rumble of thunder once more . . . but nearer this time. The faintest glimmer of a flash. The three "bicycleers" set off, riding into pitch blackness which hurled back leering shadows as the spotlights pointed the strip of path ahead. They rode for perhaps three hundred yards when Stuffy, in the lead, raised his arm and jumped quietly from his wheel. At the left was a slender gully hollowed out by past rains. Into this, Stuffy dragged his wheel and Pepper and Brick did likewise without stopping to question their chum's motive.

"What next?" asked Pepper.

"Take your spotlights off your bikes," directed Stuffy. "We're going to do some scouting!"

There was a stir in the branches overhead. The

trees began to sway gently as the advance guard of the storm arrived in the form of strong, droning gusts of wind.

"This is a heck of a way to start camping," grumbled Brick. "I'm as hungry as an empty barrel!"

"Well, gobble a bite now," ordered Stuffy. "Because we're in for a busy night."

The chums crouched in the gully beside their wheels. With one accord they began stripping themselves of all excess baggage. Brick handed his two pals a cake of chocolate each. They munched as they made ready for their exploit.

"Listen!"

Stuffy grabbed Pepper's arm.

"What's that?"

Some distance away, carried to them on the gusts of wind, came the faint chug! chug! of a motor. The sound kept getting closer. At first it seemed to come from the highway but soon it seemed as if it must be coming directly through the woods.

"I thought so!" said Stuffy, excitedly. "There's something funny going on in these parts. They're on a secret road or I miss the best guess I've ever made! And they're making for the clearing!"

CHAPTER II

A BOLD UNDERTAKING

FOR five minutes the three chums lay, ears on the sound of the motor car as it toiled over ground that was obviously rough. Presently the car came to a stop and there was the wind-deadened plunk of a door slamming. Then snatches of men's voices like the ins and outs of a radio program . . . but always indistinct.

"Take the tarpaulin. Spread it over the bikes so they'll be all right if it rains," commanded Stuffy. "Pepper, tie your handkerchief around that sapling so we can spot the place easy on the way back. We're going to hit the clearing through the woods!"

Quietly and quickly the boys obeyed. Stuffy took his own 'kerchief out and used it to cover the face of his spotlight to subdue the glow. Then he motioned to his two pals to follow.

"How about your rifle?" suggested Brick.

"Don't want to be bothered with it," said Stuffy, tersely. "Besides," he added, as a jabbing after-

thought, "you don't seem to think I could hit anything with it."

"Could if you used it as a club," prompted Brick, grinning.

"Say!" interposed Pepper, impatiently, "cut out this kidding! We're starting out on something ticklish!"

"All the more reason why we should have fun while we're at it," shot back Stuffy. Then his face sobered as he took the lead through the network of underbrush. A flash of lightning lingered, lighting up the woods so that the trees cast ghostlike shadows. The wind now became a steady, moaning blow but the air was still hot. None of the boys spoke after the reconnoiter began. They were too intent on working their way and making the least possible noise. It was half an hour of slow, hard going before they came in sight of the clearing again. Stuffy had led them in a semicircle so that they looked out upon the open space from a position calculated to be about directly across from the footpath.

There was nothing much visible at first glance . . . just a flickering light in the back window of the house. But gradually the chums made out the lines of a large touring car, standing out

darkly against the background of the barn, the lines played up by the faint reflection of the dancing light from the house window. A group of tall cedars, standing on a little rise of ground not far removed from the window, whistled mournfully as the wind swept through their thick, green boughs.

"Gee, if we could get to those trees without being seen, and shin up them, we might be able to figure out what's up!" said Stuffy.

"Don't see why we can't!" snapped Pepper. "Let's try it!"

The three spread out and crawled over the ground, belly fashion. They paused every so often to make observations but the coast was surprisingly clear. Apparently all were inside the house. Occasionally a laugh or a curse rang out. The boys clung close to the earth in flattened heaps when the lightning played tag with the darkness. In an incredibly short time they had reached a position outside the window which they found to be half open. Feeling quite safe from discovery, Stuffy directed Brick to climb the largest tree and as soon as he had swung himself upon the lowermost bough, Stuffy followed. Pepper picked out the tree next by and soon all three were as effectively out of sight as though they

had been wiped off the earth. From their elevated position they could look down into the back room of the house and see quite plainly what was going on!

Five men sat around an old plain-topped table. The air was blue with smoke and there was evidence of drinking. The looks of the men were sufficient to strike fear in the hearts of any one who should come upon them unexpectedly. One knew instinctively that these men were bent on no good end and one dreaded the very thought of ever being placed at their mercy.

"Outlaws!" whispered Stuffy, excitedly. "A whole room full of 'em!"

"Look! There's the geezer who told us to beat it!" said Brick, pointing the short, thickset man out just as this fellow was speaking. The man across the table was listening intently to what the little fellow had to say. This man appeared to be the ringleader. He was tall and big-chested with a rough crop of beard. When he spoke in reply his voice boomed so that it carried plainly to the eavesdroppers outside.

"That's all the more reason why we got to jump the country. We've hung around here plenty long enough!"

The short, thickset man laughed his slurring sort of laugh.

"Ho! Ho! You don't have to worry about them kids! They just happened to wander onto us, accidental like. But I scared the everlastin' daylights out of 'em! They's miles away from here now and goin' yet!"

Stuffy nudged Brick so sharply at this overheard remark that Brick almost fell from the tree. Even the thunder seemed to mutter in merry appreciation. Miles away and going yet! R-r-r-r-r-umble . . . umble!

"Makes no difference!" retorted the ringleader, banging a big fist on the table. "To-night we do our last job and get out! Now pipe this, buddies. I got a straight tip that the fast mail express carries a million to-night. One million berries! Is she worth goin' after? Would she look good split five ways? You tell the big tight world she would! And I got it all doped out how we're goin' to get her. She'll be easy as pickin' up the wrong umbrella. Listen to this. . . ."

The ringleader bent forward and his voice lowered. Just then an extraordinarily bright flash lit up the country side, followed by a deafening crash. The wind increased into a whipping gale.

"Wow, we're going to get soused right!" called Pepper.

"Shut up!" ordered Stuffy. "That's the least of our worries!"

It was hard to hear what the men were saying after that but they leaned over the table and talked in earnest, sometimes in excited and demanding tones. The boys were able to make out that the ringleader was referred to as Chick Squires; the man at his right, a tousled-haired fellow with a bulging jaw, was called Lem Sharkey; while the short, thickset fellow who had "scared the everlastin' daylights out of them," was known as Jerry. The other two remained enigmas as far as names were concerned.

" . . . due at the curve at one-six . . ." the boys caught of Chick Squire's voice, " . . . with the railroad ties in the ravine. How'd you think we'd stop her? . . . Sure! Lem'll wait in the car just above the bluff. . . . Yeh! . . . straight through Jamesville hell bent fer election . . . then cut for the border . . . ought to be out of the country by noon to-morrow. . . !" It was such snatches of conversation that the boys were now called upon to piece together.

In a short while the bandits pushed away from the table and busied themselves with preparations.

Once Chick Squires came to the window and stuck his grizzled head out. The storm had taken a long time in coming. Part of it had seemed to have gone around. There was almost a continuous play of electricity now. The ringleader cackled with satisfaction.

"This rain ought to do the crops good," he said, turning away.

The boys heard riotous laughter from within. Pepper began to grow restless and eager to be doing something. He made a movement as though to drop out of the tree.

"Stay where you are!" said Stuffy. "It's their move first. We can't do anything by making a break for it. It's up to us to stick close and see if we can't outwit them somehow!"

Pepper waved a condescending hand and resumed his seat on the swaying bough.

It was not long until the back door of the house opened and shut. Jerry came out into the clearing and studied the weather. Then he went to the car and put something in it. In a few minutes he was joined by the men whose names the boys had not grasped, and they helped in bringing some loaded gunny sacks from the barn which they placed on the floor of the car. When all was in readiness, Jerry

gave a low whistle and Chick Squires sauntered from the house followed by Lem. The men stood in a little knot about the car, talking. Then Lem climbed in behind the wheel.

"Hurry up you'se guys. We got a lot of work to do before train time!"

The two men who had helped Jerry lurched into the back of the car and sat down heavily. Chick Squires placed his foot on the running board and turned to Jerry.

"You're sure you'll be all right here?"

"Sure! They can't get nothin' on me. How can they? You're takin' all the booty with you. I'm not hankerin' to skip the country. Not when I ain't been mixed up directly in any of your deals!"

The ringleader reached in and unlatched the front door. He held out his right hand to the man they were going to leave behind.

"Well, that's up to you, Jerry. But don't forget . . . if you're ever caught . . . that we offered you a clean chance to get away. We've played square with you all through and if this little transaction comes off accordin' to blue prints to-night, we'll find a way of gettin' you your share. Understand?"

Jerry nodded and said something in return that the boys could not hear. Then his slurring laugh rang out, the motor of the car suddenly gave a convulsive spit and the gear ground into low.

From their position in the trees, the chums watched with bated breath, the course that the car took on its way out of the clearing. There seemed to be a solid mask of woods under the sweeping beam of the headlights but presently the car pointed directly at a spot, a rough-hewn opening just large enough to permit its passage. Into this narrow lane the auto plunged and for a moment, the bouncing of the men up and down in their seats could be plainly heard. Then there was nothing but the taillight and it finally faded from view with the noise.

"All right!" signaled Stuffy. "Down! . . . Easy, though! Don't let Jerry see you!"

The three chums slid carefully from the trees and hugged up against the side of the house. Some little distance away, Jerry was just closing the barn door.

"We ought to get Jerry if we can," whispered Stuffy, hoarsely. "It shouldn't be so hard . . . three to one . . . we can tackle him as he comes back to the house. How about it?"

"You're the king!" said Pepper.

Even in that instant, Stuffy turned about to give his chum a humorously contemptuous glance.

"Well, I'm glad you're not arguing now, anyway."

Jerry started back to the house, mind apparently preoccupied. He glanced sharply at the heavens as the skies gave signs of opening up and pouring down rain. But he kept up an easy stride until he reached the door, when he put out his hand for the knob. . . .

It is probable that Jerry did not know what hit him for a full minute. He felt the shock of a body striking against his knees and his legs crumpling under him. He fell to the ground heavily, thumping his head against the side of the house. Then it seemed as though he were upon the bottom of a pounding heap. Jerry, perhaps vaguely, heard the back door open and then an excited voice cry out, "Here's some rope! I found it!" And the next thing Jerry knew he was being dragged into the house, securely bound, hand and foot.

"Awfully sorry you have to lay your peepers on us again," apologized Stuffy. "But we just had to

come back and pay you a visit. You treated us so nice and cordial the first time!"

"And if any one should mention football," added Pepper, "you make the swellest tackling dummy I ever wrapped my arms around!"

Jerry was so astounded at being captured, and by the boys he had lightly termed "kids," that he could do nothing but lie on his back in the corner of the barely furnished room where they had put him and stare speechlessly up at them.

"Haven't got so much to say now, have you?" taunted Stuffy, while Pepper and Brick searched the room for possible weapons.

Jerry gave an inarticulate growl of rage but refused to talk.

"It's after ten," continued Stuffy. "We've got to be traveling!"

"Not a gun in sight," announced Brick.

"Nice and peaceable when he's here alone, isn't he?" chuckled Stuffy. Then to Jerry, "Roll over a second while I see if you're tied up good enough to hold till we get back."

Jerry complied only because there was nothing else for him to do. Stuffy examined the knots carefully and satisfied himself that there was no getting out of them.

A splitting crack of thunder was followed by a dash of rain against the house.

"Come on, fellows! Now comes the most beautiful part of the whole business!"

Stuffy stepped to the door and picked up his spotlight. Pepper and Brick did likewise. On second thought Stuffy moved over to the table, turned down the wick of the sputtering lamp and blew out the light.

"Hey! Don't do that. Give a feller a little show!" pleaded Jerry. "Don't leave me here in the dark!"

"Beggars can't be choosers," answered Stuffy saucily. "And be sure you're here when we come back because we want to lay our peepers on you again!"

Out in the storm the three chums held a hasty conference. By this time the bandits in the car had no doubt reached the curve of the highway. The boys could picture Lem waiting in the machine while his comrades in crime were heaping railroad ties on the track below the bluff. About three hours before the fast mail train was due to pass that point. No chance of help short of nineteen miles . . . Jamesville. Seven miles to the house with the telephone. Three-quarters of a mile on the winding path just

to get to the highway from the clearing. And the storm upon them!

"To our bikes!" ordered Stuffy, and the three set out in the direction of the footpath. The rain beat upon them in wet gusts, driven by the wind. They had not left the clearing before they were drenched to the skin. Two hundred yards down the path and Stuffy's spotlight picked out the white handkerchief that Pepper had tied about a slender sapling to mark the place where their wheels were hidden. The little gully was even now supporting a lively stream from the pouring rain. It was the work of a moment to jerk the tarpaulin covering from the bicycles and for each youth to grab his "steed."

"It's going to be tough riding on this path now," said Stuffy, grimly, as he fastened his spotlight back upon the handle-bars. "But we've got to get to the highway soon as we can."

"Then what?" asked Brick. "Gee, that flash struck close!" as a flaming sheet of lightning shot through the woods.

"Can't do much figuring ahead on this job," said Stuffy. "Just have to take things as they come and do the best we can. I'd thought of setting out for Jamesville but we couldn't ever make it and get help back in time to do any good in this storm!"

It took a good hour to reach the highway over the footpath. The boys found that they had to walk at least half the way, pushing their wheels. The branches hung so low and were whipped about so furiously by the raging of the elements that bicycle riding, even though the bed of the path was hard, proved exceedingly perilous. Stuffy, taking the lead, had several tumbles. In one of these his spotlight was broken and Pepper had to go in front with Stuffy falling into the center position on the single file drive through the woods.

"Well, I'm glad that's over!" said Stuffy, as they crawled out upon the highway. "Let's see . . . the curve where they're planning on staging this hold-up is about a quarter of a mile down the road. We'd have to go by their parked machine to get to Jamesville anyway."

"Why not tackle Lem the same way we did Jerry?" suggested Pepper. "We ought to be able to sneak up on him unawares as he's sitting in the car. The storm's making so much noise that he can't hear us coming."

"I'm game, if you are!" said Brick.

"If *I* am?" snorted Stuffy. "Did you ever see me when I wasn't game? Come on!"

The boys had the storm at their backs as they

pedaled down the concrete highway. As they came to the beginning of the curve, they dismounted and set their wheels beside the road.

"That's hard work!" panted Stuffy. "My chain sounds like it's about clogged with mud."

"Mine, too," said Pepper.

Rounding the curve, very stealthily, the chums discovered the car at precisely the place they had imagined it would be from the conversation they had overheard. It was pulled up on the wrong side of the road, nearest the railroad track, and the lights had been turned out.

"They've got their side curtains up!" said Stuffy in a hushed voice. "Now follow me and when we get ten paces behind the machine, let me go up and get the lay of things. Then, if I motion for you to come on, I want Pepper on my side next to the wheel while Brick breaks in through the door on the other side. Lem'll probably have a gun . . . so watch out!"

Step by step the three pals approached the car from the rear. The rain swept by in sheets, pattering upon the concrete, while the lightning flashed intermittently and the thunder muttered and rumbled. It was the wildest sort of a night to be out on the road . . . and wilder still to be willfully flirting

with a band of outlaws who had chosen such a night to attempt the hold-up of the fast express!

The next few seconds were pulse-beating ones for Pepper and Brick. They crouched, ten paces behind the car, eyes on Stuffy as he crawled up beside the machine and, raising cautiously, peered through the side curtains. Instead of motioning, Stuffy tiptoed back.

"Lem's asleep!" he informed. "At least he's all slumped over in his seat. I'm going to try to get the door open without his knowing it. You wait, Brick, till you hear us starting in, before you come at him from your side. Ready?"

CHAPTER III

ANXIOUS MOMENTS

THE crumpled up figure in the car, with his head pillowed on an arm that lay across the steering wheel, stirred uneasily as the door on his side of the car clicked open and a hand reached in to unfasten the strip of side curtains. There was a scraping noise on the running board and the figure started up only to be caught from three sides and borne down by three young tiger-like attackers, while his feet were effectively pinioned by the quite innocent looking rod of the steering wheel. Pepper, instead of waiting to follow Stuffy through the front door, had come in through the back and slipped an arm under Lem's chin from behind, pulling his head back across the top of the front seat in a choking grip. Brick, pouncing in at the same moment that Stuffy plunged through from his side, grabbed one of Lem's arms while Stuffy grabbed the other. A coil of rope lay atop the gunny sacks in the rear and Pepper

passed this over to Stuffy with his free hand. Lem made a furious attempt to break loose but he had no room to struggle and the grip that Pepper had about his throat was suffocating. His hands were soon tightly bound and a loaded revolver taken from his suit coat pocket.

"Get out of the car!" commanded Stuffy, standing back and motioning to Pepper to release his hold. "Don't you make a squawk either!"

Lem painfully obeyed, whimpering as he did so. But when he saw that his captors were only boys his whimpering ceased and his astonishment knew no bounds.

"So you're in the hold-up game, eh?" he threw at them. "Startin' young, I'd call it."

"What do you mean, 'hold-up'?" blazed Stuffy.

"Why . . . you're after my car, ain't you?" observed Lem.

Desperate as the situation was the chums could not refrain from laughing. Of course Lem had no reason to suspect that they were onto the bandits or that they knew he drove a bandit car. Lem's only supposition was that they intended to rob him.

"Yes, we're after your car," admitted Stuffy. "And we're after you, too!"

Lem stared at the boys bewilderedly.

Stuffy consulted his wrist watch, then whistled softly.

"Whew! Time goes fast. It's ten minutes after twelve. Train due in less than an hour. We'll have to hurry and disable this car!"

Pepper, face flushed with a sudden idea, clutched Stuffy's arm.

"No! Don't disable the car! Give me Lem's coat and cap and I'll drive it!"

"You're crazy!" said Stuffy and Brick in the same breath.

"No, I'm not! It's our big chance. We can't get the rest any other way. Let Brick ride for all he's worth to the nearest telephone . . . that's seven miles and he ought to get there before train time. He can get word ahead to Jamesville. Tell 'em that I'm coming through there about 2 A. M. with a carload of bandits and that I'll stop the car and turn 'em over!"

Lem, white-eyed with fear, burst out warningly.

"Don't you try that, Bud! If they find you out they'll kill you sure! Them guys is bad eggs!"

"We've done about all we can do as it is, except disabling the automobile," faltered Stuffy. "That's going a little too far."

But Pepper was obstinate. The idea obsessed

him. He persisted, urging and arguing and almost crying at the delay.

"I'm not afraid of their finding me out," he entreated. "You're wasting valuable time. It's nineteen miles to Jamesville and Brick ought to get to that house with the telephone just as soon as he can. The storm's letting up a little now. Hurry up, you fellows. You do your parts and I'll do mine. I'm the best driver and this is my job!"

Pepper finally won out. Lem, under protest, was made to part with his coat and cap and Pepper slipped the articles on, taking his place behind the wheel. Brick ran back to get his bicycle and soon came riding up.

"It's up to you, Brick. If you don't get word through before I reach Jamesville, I'm a goner!" called Pepper.

"I'm going to march this bird back to the house in the clearing," announced Stuffy, facing Lem around at the point of the revolver. "When you get on that telephone, don't forget to tell the cops where to find me!"

"I won't," assured Brick. "Good luck, pals!" And he swung off into the night, pedaling as fast as he dared with the bad condition under wheel, the mud flying in a spray.

Stuffy cleared his throat and looked over at Pepper as he addressed the outlaw, Lem.

"I want you to start off up the highway till we hit the footpath. You'll be able to see all right because I'm going to have my spotlight. But don't you even once, under any consideration, turn your head to look back or I'll drill you through. I can take the knot out of a board fence at fifty feet so don't get it in your noodle that you're fooling with a kid!"

Pepper smothered a laugh as the much subdued Lem shuffled off and Stuffy, slipping the revolver in his pocket, pushed along behind, waving a grim good-by to his pal who must face the toughest ordeal of all.

It was not until after Stuffy and Brick had gone that Pepper fully realized what he had undertaken. But the long minutes by himself in the bandit car with nothing but the sound of the beating rain and the thoughts—chilling thoughts now—of what might happen to him if there was so much as the slightest hitch in his hastily constructed plans, made his heart pound with a gripping fear. Twice Pepper actually got out of the car and almost took to the woods, abandoning everything. The overcoming of two of the outlaws, through taking them off their guard and

by surprise, had been so easy that Pepper, in the thrill of the adventure, had been led to propose this mad scheme for catching the rest of the gang! He fell to wondering how Brick was getting along on the lonely, wet ride to the house with the telephone. His thoughts then raced to Stuffy—good old dependable Stuffy—who might have his hands more than full if he should find, on getting back to the clearing, that Jerry had slipped his bonds!

"One-six! One-six!" Pepper kept repeating to himself. Would this time never come . . . or was the fast express late? And what would happen when it did come? Would the speeding train crash into the heaped up railroad ties or would . . . ? Pepper's heart gave a sudden leap and then seemed to stand still.

T-o-o-o-t! Toot!

A long and a short blast came echoing out of the hollow, followed very shortly by the sound of flying wheels on steel. The fast express just entering the upper end of the curve!

Stuffy heard the whistle and halted in his tracks half-way up the path to the clearing, with the now fuming Lem stumbling ahead.

Brick heard the whistle three miles down the road

as he struggled onward with a chain and sprocket so gummed with mud that it took all his strength to keep the bicycle going.

Pepper heard the whistle, crouching in the driver's seat with hands nervously clutching the wheel and gritting his teeth in a determination to live up to his end of the bargain.

Then came the long-sounding shriek of brakes hastily applied and the grind of wheels as they slid resistingly along rails. A sobbing scream of escaping steam capped by a deathly silence!

Pepper breathlessly counted the seconds until five hour-like minutes had crawled past. Then, from the ravine below, banked by heavy woods and a thicket, there came a quick succession of shots. Pepper pulled Lem's cap well down over his face and tapped his feet on the footboards in an effort to curb his excitement.

Ten more minutes that dragged until Pepper had been driven almost frantic . . . when the suspense was partly relieved by the crash of lumbering feet lunging up the steep side of the bluff from the ravine . . . a few moments later the labored breathing of men who quite obviously knew well the ground over which they were treading at such speed in practically total darkness.

Hardly conscious of what he was doing, his heart thumping wildly against his eardrums, Pepper reached back and opened the rear door, then started the engine. He had scarcely done this than the thicket opened with a swishing movement and three forms staggered out, groping for the side of the car.

"Step on it!" hissed a voice that Pepper knew to be that of Chick Squires, the ringleader.

Snapping on the lights, Pepper jammed his foot on the gas and felt the car leap away with a skidding start as the tires caught at the wet concrete. Soon the machine was doing better than forty miles an hour.

"Well, we got it!" gasped Chick, leaning over the front seat and dangling two bulging bags within sight of Pepper's eyes. "They almost got us, too. Did snipe Pinky in the arm but I popped the messenger. Guess Tom bumped off the conductor. Come on. Let her out! Give her everything she's got. We gotta travel!"

Pepper could do naught else but comply. He did not dare look around nor make answer to the bandit leader for fear of detection. And it was all he could do to hold the swaying car on the highway as it roared along with the speedometer pointing jerkily to fifty miles an hour!

Back in the clearing at last, Stuffy walked his captive, Lem, up to the back door of the little house. He turned the knob and had Lem enter the dark room first while he paused to strike a match from his matchbox. The flickering light showed that Jerry had not yet gotten free, although he had struggled mightily to do so and had rolled all about the room, even succeeding in knocking over the table in his efforts to gain his feet. Stuffy applied the dying out flame to the lamp wick and invited Lem to sit down.

"So they got you, too, eh?"

Somehow Lem's predicament called forth the slurring laugh from Jerry. It struck the old fellow funny that one of his accomplices had also been made the victim of mere boys.

"Shut up!" snarled Lem. "This ain't no joke!"

"You're right, it ain't," agreed Jerry. "But it's funny just the same."

The two men lapsed into a sullen and glowering silence.

"Might as well be sociable," advised Stuffy, taking a seat near the door. "It'll be some time yet before you're tied loose and I don't enjoy doing nothing any better than you do."

Six miles of the seven traversed, Brick was forced to toss his bicycle by the wayside and continue on foot because the chain had drawn so tight that the sprocket would no longer revolve. It was on this last mile that Brick suddenly sensed the approach of an automobile behind him. The countryside was suddenly lighted up by the dancing flare of headlights and, looking back, Brick beheld a sight which set his blood tingling.

Coming toward him at tremendous speed was the bandit car with Pepper at the wheel. It was swaying perilously from side to side as if each mad careening would be its last. And the car was throwing a heavy spray of mud and water. Brick leaped into a ditch beside the road to be sure of safety. He raised up and cheered with clenched fists as the machine whizzed past with three tossing forms clinging to the rear seat and a figure huddled desperately over the wheel.

"Go it, Pepper! Go it!"

Then Brick scrambled back onto the highway and took up his frenzied run again. That telephone! If he did not reach it in time, Pepper was doomed.

Constable Alden was a sound sleeper. This went for every night in the week. Some folks had even

accused him of sleeping in the daytime. It was no wonder then that it took the telephone bell ten minutes of persistent ringing to wake him up. And then another five minutes to get him out of bed.

"Well, what is it?"

"Hello, is this the constable?"

"It was last night." The constable had a chipper way about him that was second nature.

"I'm calling from the Deakins' home, twelve miles out on the state highway. I want to report the robbery of the fast mail train at Lookout Curve."

"What!" The constable's eyes opened wide. "Say that again!" He clicked the receiver up and down eagerly to get a better connection. "Hold-up? Lookout Curve? The mail train?"

"I can't take up time going into detail, sir, but my name's Brick Mitchell and I'm one of three fellows that started out camping and we ran into the bandit gang. One of the boys is holding two of 'em in a shack a quarter of a mile up the road beyond the curve and three-quarters of a mile toward the lake . . . in a clearing . . . and the other one is driving the bandit car with three bandits in it . . . straight toward your town!"

"Wait! Let me get this right!" broke in the constable, stamping up and down in his excitement.

"You say the bandits are heading this way in their car?"

"Yes . . . they should be through there almost any minute. Get the town out ready to catch 'em, but don't shoot. My buddy's at the wheel. They don't know it's him. They think it's one of their own men and when he sees you folks he's going to stop the car!"

"Great governor, boy! Are you telling me straight?"

"Do you think I'd call you up this time of night for a practical joke? For Pete's sake, constable, get busy or it'll be too late!"

"All right! All right! Er . . . hello! What's that?"

"I say—don't forget to send help to my other buddy out in the clearing!"

"Well, he'll have to keep his shirt on. We got to take care of that bandit car first!"

In the next five minutes Constable Alden did credit to the Jamesville volunteer firemen. He dressed, strapped on his cartridge belt and revolver and was out of the house in three and dashing down the street to the village square where he broke into the All Settlers Church and Town Meeting Hall and pulled the cord attached to the fire bell furiously. Lights

began to go on in Jamesville houses and people commenced to jump into their clothes. Soon there were dark forms hastening toward Main Street and scanning the skyline in search of a possible reflection.

"Where's the fire?" asked one, spying the constable.

"Ain't no fire!" shouted the officer of the law excitedly. "But there's a bandit car due through here any second and it's going to stop so's we can arrest 'em!"

The gathering group of villagers looked at the constable as though they thought he was out of his head.

"You're crazy!" said Piper, the blacksmith. "No bandits are goin' to be that accommodatin'!"

"You wait and see," retorted the constable. "The fellow that's driving is going to put one over on 'em!"

On the outskirts of Jamesville, Chick Squires leaned over to demand more speed from the man he took to be Lem Sharkey. The first street light pierced through the side curtains. The ringleader let out an oath of surprise and drew his gun, pressing it against the driver's back.

"I don't know who you are, young fellow, nor how you got here . . . but by Jinks you're going to go through this town like a streak of blue blazes! Give her the juice now. Clear to the floor!"

Pepper could do nought else but comply. He caught a glimpse of the crowd of citizens lining the main street ahead and he knew, in that agonizing moment, that Brick had fulfilled his part well. As the car neared the hastily drawn up posse, the bandits crouched on the floor of the machine, expecting to ride through a volley. But no shot was fired. The car tore past at such terrific speed that it rattled the windows of Jamesville store fronts. It was gone from sight almost before the villagers had more than seen it.

"Thought they were going to stop!" jeered the blacksmith.

"Mistake somewhere," deduced the constable. "Come on. We've got to follow 'em!"

Two automobile loads of Jamesville residents, heavily armed, were soon placed in pursuit.

On the outer edge of Jamesville, a bridge helped the state highway to span the Eager river. It was, while speeding madly toward that bridge, that Pepper saw a desperate chance of bringing his wild ride

to a sudden and complete end. Pepper gave every bit of gas to the engine that it would take. The scorching hot motor responded with a crackling roar. As he neared the bridge, Pepper put his left hand on the door lever and with his right whipped the wheel over as far as it would go. The car swerved so quickly that it was a miracle it did not turn turtle. Pepper felt the pressure of the gun barrel against his back give way. Hoarse screams came from behind. Then the car left the road, just missed a stone abutment and plunged down the embankment. . . .

The terrific speed carried the machine and its occupants in a clean leap out over the swollen waters of the Eager river. In those seconds that the car was in the air, Pepper had spun the door open and dived from his seat. The car, upending, struck the water with a thundering splash and there was a loud hissing sound as the steaming motor went under. The next instant Pepper and the bandits were fighting for their lives in the rushing stream.

Instead of sinking completely beneath the water, the rear of the machine protruded and it was to this that the three bandits clung when they had extricated themselves after frenzied clawing at the side cur-

tains. Chick Squires was actually carried under before he could fight his way out and when he bobbed to the top he was in a semiconscious condition. Luckily for him, the fellow he had called Tom grabbed Squires by the collar and kept his head above water while holding fast to the top piece of the car.

Pepper, striking the river clear of the plunging machine, and being an expert swimmer, immediately struck out for shore. From the bank, shouts and the sweep of a searchlight told him that the posse had arrived and were aware of what had happened. One of the pursuers parked his car in such a way that the headlights played directly upon the spot where the car had gone down. A rope was thrown off the bridge to the stranded bandits and they were pulled ashore one by one, Squires coming in first. They were placed under heavy guard at once and hurried off to be locked up.

Pepper, clothes brimming with water, refused every kind of attention and had eyes only for the constable.

"Get an auto quick! My pal's got two more of 'em out near Red Glow Lake. He needs help!"

"That's just what I'm a-doin' now," informed Constable Alden, irritated by all the demands being

made upon him. "One thing at a time, son. One thing at a time!"

Jamesville citizens, sworn in as deputies, were detailed to stand by the car and to attempt to salvage its valuable cargo at the break of day.

Pepper insisted on being taken along on the trip back to aid Stuffy. It gave him a strange sensation to be returning so soon over the route of the wildest ride he had ever experienced . . . a ride he was destined never to forget.

As the machine load came in sight of the lone house with the telephone it was brought to a stop by a figure who stood in the middle of the road and flagged it madly. The figure jumped on the running board, and seeing Pepper, cried out, "Good boy, Pep! Did you get 'em?"

"Did he get 'em?" answered Constable Alden. "He darn near drowned 'em!"

At Lookout curve, the automobile was again stopped, this time by railroad authorities who had been combing the vicinity in search of some possible clue as to the bandits' whereabouts.

"We got 'em!" announced the constable. "And we're going after more! Come along?"

Pepper showed the posse the secret road some yards above the small footpath which was cleverly

concealed from the state highway. It was rough traveling over this road and most of the men preferred to walk.

When the clearing was reached, Brick and Pepper ran on ahead, disregarding warnings from the rest of the party. They flung open the back door of the little house and darted anxious glances within.

Lying on the floor, looking anything but comfortable, were the two bandits . . . and propped back in a chair, with feet on the lower rungs and his head leaning against the wall, was Stuffy! He glared at his two chums in mock anger.

"What do you mean, busting in here like that? I almost had these two birds asleep!"

Then the three chums embraced with as great joy as though they had not seen each other in years.

After the railroad officials had placed handcuffs on Lem and Jerry and led them outside, they came back in to give the boys a bit of information which they thought would be of interest. J. Frederick Mullen, head detective for the W. & G. Lines, who had accompanied the large shipment of currency, did the talking.

"A pretty neat little piece of work you boys turned in," said Mullen. "For which the railroad company gladly pays twenty-five hundred dollars."

Stuffy, Pepper and Brick looked actually dazed.

"Yes . . . and if I ain't badly mistaken, there's a reward out for the capture of any one of this gang what's been terrorizin' the country . . . a reward of one thousand," added Constable Alden, not to be outdone.

"Gee!" said Stuffy. "We didn't do this for money. Honest we didn't. We just did it for the . . . for the fun!"

The members of the posse laughed heartily.

"You'd better run in with us to Jamesville for the rest of the night and to-day," advised the detective. We'll need you in clearing up this case."

On the way in, Stuffy, sitting with much assumed authority between Pepper and Brick, started out in somber tones.

"The special meeting of the committee of three to decide what we're going to do with more money than we ever saw before, is now called to order!"

Pepper and Brick winked at one another.

"He's appointed himself chairman again," said Brick.

"Well," laughed Pepper, "any one can put a motion but it takes a real guy to make one. So granting that we *do* get the money, I hereby move that

we put it out at interest and use it to help pay our way through college!"

"Bully idea!" cried Brick.

"Motion appears to be carried without any serious opposition," observed Stuffy.

For the next ten minutes none of the chums spoke. Each was going over in his mind the furious round of events which had occurred to them since their arrival a scant twelve hours before.

Finally Pepper settled back in the seat with a sigh of profound contentment.

"Now maybe we can camp in peace," he said.

"Maybe," considered Stuffy soberly. "If we don't find when we get back . . ."

"Find what?" asked Brick, as Stuffy purposely discontinued.

" . . . That the quiet gets on our nerves!" he finished, covering up quickly to keep from being pummeled on both sides.

CHAPTER IV

HEROES—OUT FOR THE TEAM

STRONG is the force of publicity. The instant state newspapers got wind of the sensational capture of the bandit ring by three youths from the town of Milford, reporters and cameramen were sent flying to the scene. Though Stuffy, Pepper and Brick modestly tried to escape and were frankly bewildered by the fuss being made over them, they were compelled to pose while pictures were taken and to further submit to interviews on how it felt to tackle a gang of desperadoes. All three boys received long distance calls from worried parents at home, entreating them to return at once. But this the chums had no idea of doing. They were delayed three days in Jamesville, however, before getting free to follow out the camping they had planned.

"Gee, I know how it must feel to be famous now," said Stuffy, when he and Pepper and Brick had finally

gotten off by themselves. "And believe me, if what we've just been through is a sample, somebody else can have the fame!"

"Here, too," assented Pepper.

"Maybe that's the reason the fish don't bite," suggested Brick. "They read in the papers about us coming out here. . . ."

"Drown that guy!" groaned Stuffy.

The day that the three chums arrived back in Milford was a memorable one. They had almost managed to forget their exciting experience of several weeks previous, but the town hadn't! Oh, no! The moment the chums were sighted pedaling their way, as inconspicuously as possible, down a side street, they were set upon by a mob of admiring townspeople and led toward the town hall. Come to find out some one had known just about the time that the boys would return and had arranged an impromptu reception. There were speeches and a high official of the W. & G. railroad was present to tell the boys again how much the company appreciated their remarkable exploit. The boys were called upon to tell just how they executed the capture of the bandits and then everybody crowded around to shake their hands and look them over.

"This is worse than being put on display in a museum," Stuffy managed to whisper to Pepper, in the midst of ceremonies.

"It's almost worse than that auto ride I took!" replied Pepper, greatly embarrassed.

"If the cracks in this floor were just a little larger," wished Brick. "Oh, boy—just maybe I wouldn't like to drop down out of sight!"

But the townspeople meant well enough. The whole state had honored the boys. Columns of editorials had been written about them. Their heroism had been lauded from pulpits, from school platforms and in all public places. Hundreds of messages of congratulation had been received by the town of Milford. A theatrical man had even tried to reach the boys with an offer for them to appear in a vaudeville version of their thrilling feat. The only wonder is, that with all the attention being showered upon them, the three chums were able to keep their heads.

The first day at school they were given a tremendous ovation! The new school term always opened with chapel exercises and the three Freshmen chums were the lions of the hour. The superintendent and principal, bowing to the tribute being paid by the students, spoke words of welcome, tell-

ing Stuffy, Pepper and Brick how honored the faculty and the student body of Milford High were to be represented by young men of their character and splendid bravery. All of which was most embarrassing. The chums began to realize that it was going to be quite some task, this having done something they would always be expected to live up to. It made the chums almost wish they were still back in grade school and hadn't gone on that eventful camping trip. How different everything seemed once a fellow had actually experienced it!

A few weeks later, any one within a block of the backyard at 316 West Flagg Street, in the small town of Milford, would have heard a sound—a sound either familiar or unfamiliar according to the individual. In fact, it had been almost a year since any one in Milford had heard that sound . . . almost as long since they had seen any frost-bitten leaves on trees . . . or had stayed off the front porch at night because the evenings were getting cool.

Plunk! A hollow-sounding plunk! And in a little while another plunk! Plunk! . . . Plunk! . . . Plunk! At irregular intervals . . . the hollow-sounding plunk!

Those venturing closer would have caught the

sound of voices—joyful, eager voices. And wiser ones would have guessed. . . .

The plunk was nothing more or less than that of sturdy toes, reinforced by shoe leather, plying against a time-honored and well-worn football.

"Is that all the farther you can kick?" taunted Pepper Lawton of Stuffy Owen as he caught one of the latter's punts out near the alley. "Say—you'd think your leg was in a plaster Paris cast or something. Only thirty yards! Holy mackerel! Snap out of it. My sister could kick farther than that with her left foot."

Over near the woodshed to the Mitchell home, the chum addressed stood, hands on hips, grinning at the round of "compliments" hurled his way.

"Can't expect me to tear the bladder out the first night of practice!" he retorted, good-naturedly. "I haven't seen either of you fellows showing much," he added, swinging about to include Brick Mitchell at his elbow.

"We're not expected to show much," answered Brick, his eyes twinkling. "But you're supposed to be a punter . . . and you're sure not going to make the football team as fullback unless you . . ."

"Here! Gimme that ball!" called Stuffy, suddenly, holding out his hands.

"Aha! The boy's getting wild!" joshed Pepper as he sailed the pigskin on a line to his pal. "Watch out, now!"

Across the alley, interested spectators of the proceedings, the assorted and highly prized collection of roosters and hens owned by Elmer Sanderson, Milford's distinguished chicken fancier, squinted through the wire fencing and wondered what kind of a bird would let three fellows kick it around like that.

Stuffy Owen, catching the ball, paced back with it to a spot between the Mitchell house and the residence of the next-door neighbor so that he might make use of the full length of the backyard, and then some.

"Hey, where you going?" called Pepper. "Did you all of a sudden get the idea that you were Jim Thorpe?"

"You wait till you see this kick!" threatened Stuffy. "I'll show you who I am!"

"Looks like you'll be a big dub!" prophesied Brick. "You can't even kick to the alley from there."

"Is that so?"

Stuffy held the ball out in front of him and planted himself firmly, ready to punt. Pepper moved in a few feet to a place where he believed Stuffy's punt

might carry. There was a moment of silent suspense. Then Stuffy bent forward, dropping the ball to meet his toe which he started on an upward swing with all the force he could command. There was the hollow-sounding plunk again . . . but this time the plunk fairly cracked!

Pepper, taking one quick glance at the over-ending ball, turned his back and scampered out toward the alley. Brick emitted a yell of surprise.

Strutting with a confident swagger about the chicken yard, the cock of the roost paused to stretch himself to his full height. Oh, what a rooster was he! Always a blue-ribbon winner at the poultry shows, the consciousness of his own importance had been impressed time and again upon him. It is natural then that he had attempted to impress his importance upon the neighborhood at large by blasting the earliest morning air with unwelcome cock-a-doodle-doos. But who could complain to such a distinguished personage as Elmer Sanderson for being disturbed at the faintest break of dawn by the boisterous crowings of a conceited rooster?

It was upon this quiet and dignified scene, on this particularly particular afternoon that a spiraling object came hurtling out of the sky much after the

fashion of a bomb. Against the outer side of the chicken-wire a figure leaped frantically into the air in a desperate effort to avert what gave every promise of proving a catastrophe.

It is doubtful if, in the language of fowls, the rooster ever knew what hit him. The bomb scored a direct hit, knocking all the conceit out of the prize-winner in one wallop. But the bomb didn't stop there. It wasn't like ordinary bombs. It was a bounding bomb. It struck the ground eventually and then began a wild dance about the inclosure, bowling over squawking chickens like feathered ten-pins. When it finally came to rest against the hen-house, the atmosphere was full of feathers and dust and flapping wings. As high as five feet above the ground madly clucking hens clung to the chicken-wire. Some had caught their heads, with necks jammed through the wire loops; others hung to the netting upside down, telling the world about their predicament in a series of cackling "Bloody murders!" A few skated around the inclosure like small airplanes with wings spread, trying to take off from the ground. And all shied away from the now peacefully reposing bomb.

"Now you've done it!" charged Pepper.

"Go and get it!" directed the successful punter.

"Not on your life!" rejoined Pepper, beating a retreat. "You kicked it!"

Just then the back door of the Sanderson house banged, and a fuzzy-haired, stubby man came running out. He took one look at the various degrees of hysterics his chickens were in and then he went into hysterics himself. There was no escape. It was up to Stuffy and Pepper and Brick to face the music . . . if you could call it music.

"See here! What do you fellows mean?" he bellowed.

"Gee, we're in for it now," Brick confided to Stuffy in a low tone. "Oh, boy—he's so mad you can almost see sparks jumping from his eyes!"

"What do you mean . . . I say?" bellowed Mr. Sanderson again, picking up his dazed rooster who thought the sky had fallen on its head.

"My—my foot slipped," apologized Stuffy. "Honest, Mr. Sanderson . . . I didn't think I could kick that far."

"You didn't, eh? You did it on purpose! I know you boys! I'll bring a suit against you, that's what I'll do. A suit."

"You can't . . . we're minors," advised Pepper.

"Then I'll bring it against your parents," retorted the enraged chicken fancier. "The idea—scaring

my hens this way—chances are they won't lay any eggs now for several weeks."

"If you'll pardon me," suggested Brick, soberly, "I should think it 'ud work just the opposite. Maybe it'll scare eggs out of 'em!"

"Don't get fresh, young man!" snapped the poultry-raiser. "You've just about killed this blue-ribbon rooster. The ball must have struck him full force!"

"He walked right under it," explained Pepper. "I saw him. He was stretching his wings and not paying any attention to what was going on around. If he'd only been looking . . ."

"My chickens aren't obliged to dodge footballs!" roared Mr. Sanderson. "They're minding their own business in their own yard. If you boys had been minding your own business this wouldn't have happened."

Mr. Sanderson set the rooster down, still a bit unsteady on his legs and acting as if the world was looping the loop. The sympathizing hens gathered around to offer what encouragement they could.

"I don't think any of my poultry stock will ever be the same again," said Mr. Sanderson, mournfully.

Stuffy couldn't resist a guarded wink at Pepper and Brick.

"Well—how about our football?" he asked.

"Your football!" fairly screamed the chicken fancier. *"It's* all right. No danger of *it* being damaged."

"Yes—but that's not what I meant," explained Stuffy, patiently. "Would you mind tossing it out to us, please?"

"What!"

If Mr. Sanderson had been a rooster he would have flapped his wings and raised his comb in a rage. As it was it seemed that the fuzzy hair stiffened right up on end.

"You don't think you're going to get that football back, do you? Not after what's happened?'

"We certainly do," replied Stuffy, quietly. "Your rooster's all recovered now and the hens don't look any the worse for wear . . . except maybe they lost a few pin feathers. But they'll all grow back. It's different with the football. We can't grow another one. It's ours, and we want it."

Pepper and Brick edged over to give Stuffy their moral support. Mr. Sanderson stood a moment, looking down at the football, considering.

"If I give you the ball will you boys agree to quit playing in that backyard?" he asked, arbitrarily.

"No, sir," said Stuffy, promptly.

"Then you can't have it."

"Would you agree to moving your chickens so that we could play in our backyard?" Stuffy countered.

"No, of course not. But my chickens stay in my yard . . . and your football doesn't stay in yours!"

"Well—we *can* see that it does from now on," Stuffy compromised. "This'll never happen again, Mr. Sanderson. Honest! Now that I know how far I can kick . . . I won't kick that far any more. At least . . . not around here."

The chicken fancier hesitated.

"How about you other fellows?" he asked.

"Ho! Don't worry about them," chuckled Stuffy. "They never kicked that far in their lives . . . and they're not apt to!"

Mr. Sanderson reluctantly picked up the football. He examined it curiously.

"Hmmm? What kind of leather is this made from?" he inquired.

"Pigskin," informed Brick.

"Hmmm!" said Mr. Sanderson again, lifting the ball over the wire fence to Stuffy. "I'm surprised that pigskin would stand such a kick as that. It must be very tough."

"Yes, it is," said Stuffy. "Thank you very much."

The three chums started to back away.

"Remember," cautioned Mr. Sanderson, severely, "if that pigskin ever hits inside my chicken yard again I'll . . . I'll . . . well, I'll *kick* it so far that you won't ever see it after that!"

"I'd like to have you try it!" challenged Stuffy, interestedly.

"Sssh, you bonehead! Don't get him started on us again," whispered Pepper. "Let's beat it while the beating's good!"

Mr. Sanderson turned and went inside his chicken-coop, talking in a low voice to his pets. They followed him inside obediently, the rooster being the last one to enter, pausing to look back arrogantly at the fast-retreating trio as much as to say, "You will, will you?" and then adding an "Er—er, er—er!" for good measure.

The moment the boys were out of hearing, Pepper wheeled upon Stuffy with great enthusiasm. Slapping his chum upon the back, he exclaimed:

"Say, that was *some* punt! She carried every bit of forty-five yards!"

"Yeah, but she wasn't any good," replied Stuffy, sadly. "She went foul!"

For this wise crack the too successful punter was tackled from both sides at once and borne heavily to earth, his nose being rubbed in the sod.

Football practice for Milford High opened the last Monday in September and first call found the three Freshmen pretty well in form as regarding individual work. The backyard training had proven its worth through rounding them into condition and all three were anxious to get the "feel" of actual football togs and the sensation of working out on the gridiron.

It seemed mighty good to get into athletic harness again after the long layoff from spring. Stuffy, Pepper and Brick found themselves on a football squad generously sprinkled with veterans. Of course there were old-timers who were conspicuous for their absence, fellows who had graduated and would never appear under the colors of their beloved Milford again, but enough seasoned players remained from last year's team to justify genuine optimism. However, there were several positions in the backfield, left vacant by graduation, which would be exceedingly hard to fill. Gail Hackett's place at fullback, for instance. Gail had been a four-letter man and one of the best line-plungers in the history of the school. Bob Weldon, too. He had made a great running mate for Gail at left half. These two boys had finished their careers with the game against Reedland, Milford's worthiest foe, last Thanksgiv-

ing Day. To balance their departure, the candidacy of the Freshmen trio as well as that of Jim Hemming and Merle Conway, former members of Milford's baseball team, was favorably regarded. Then, too, there was Dub Eldred, who had been pronounced by Slim Mooney, the school wit, as being the only "illegitimate contestant."

"Dub's tried out for every school team from checkers to debating," said Slim, "and the nearest he's ever come to making any of them is in being appointed to massage the heads of the checker players after their strenuous mental exertions."

When Dub heard what Slim was saying about him he was reported to have made hot reply.

"You tell Slim," he instructed his informant, "to lay off me for awhile. I'm in earnest this time, and I'm out to make the football team this fall, or know the reason why. It's my last year with Milford and folks have just got to take me serious! What I've tried out for in the past doesn't count. Watch my smoke from now on!"

If Dub's spirit was to be taken as any criterion of the attitude that candidates were assuming toward going out for places on the football team, it could easily be argued that competition would be unusually keen and that an eleven would result of more than

ordinary power and vim. Coach Dolan always enthused over such conditions. He did not believe it was good for any fellow not to have competition in making a team . . . and wherever possible, the coach would see that each individual was pitted against another who was capable of making the struggle interesting. It was through striving that the best abilities were brought out.

And the biggest problem of the coach, or any coach for that matter, was to keep his players "continually on their toes." It was seldom indeed that Coach Dolan uttered a word of praise, feeling as he did that athletes became careless and indifferent the moment they were given to think their work satisfactory. Often the only way that Milford players could tell whether the coach was pleased with their efforts was to watch him closely for some telltale motion or gesture . . . a movement which the coach would make involuntarily. On most occasions Coach Dolan justified his nickname, "Old Sphinx face."

The first practice session was light and given over to passing the ball, starting, kicking, catching and working in squads of four. Coach Dolan, with his ability for weeding out players particularly weak in certain departments of a game, soon had some

groups of fellows concentrating on passing, others working hard at starting practice, and still others busy at kicking and punting. He called the session to an end, however, before any of the fifty-three candidates had done enough to get tired.

As Stuffy, Pepper and Brick left Brinkley field that night they were joined by Merle Conway and Jim Hemming who jogged back to the basement locker room of the High School with them.

"Well, how do you think she looks for a good team this year?" Conway asked, by way of breaking in on conversation.

"Can't prove anything by me," puffed Stuffy, "except that my wind is pretty short. You couldn't expect us to be very good judges anyway . . . this being our first year out for the team."

"Oh, I don't know as that should cut so much pie," countered Conway. "You've played on the Seventh and Eighth Grade school teams . . . and you know football material when you see it."

"I know we've got a *light looking* bunch of recruits," opined Stuffy, "if that observation is worth anything. Beef Mellon is the only real heavyweight in the crowd!"

"Right," assented Conway, "and he's a real player, too. A crackerjack center. They don't ever

get past Beef's two hundred and ten pounds. He could just about stop traffic on Main Street by bucking the automobiles. They might get around him, but they never would get over him or under him."

"Not unless they used balloon tires," grunted Pepper, "or submarine bodies. . . ."

"Smart guy!" grinned Hemming, with a wink at Conway.

"He'll get over it," prophesied the former Milford High catcher. "And if he doesn't we'll take it out on him when scrimmage starts. . . ."

"What are you fellows going to try out for?" asked Hemming, abruptly.

The three chums jogged along for a good block, unanswering. Each exchanged questioning glances with the others but no one volunteered a reply. Noticing this, Conway made haste to inquire:

" 'S'matter? Modest? Or do you figure you can keep what you're trying out for a secret?"

"No, it's not that," spoke up Stuffy, endeavoring to explain. "Fact is we've been rather undecided. You see we'd all like to make the backfield!"

"Oh, you would!" exclaimed Hemming, a bit rudely.

"We certainly would!" retorted Brick, in spirit.

"Well, that being the case, I should advise Mister

Merle Conway to look to his laurels," said Hemming, playfully. "Just because he was right half last season is no reason that he's going to be this season especially if . . ."

"No, it begins to look now as though I'll be a *'left'* half, doesn't it?" kidded Conway, laughing. "Gee, it would be great if we could all make the team. Oh, boy! That 'ud be almost too good to be true."

"That's just the trouble," lamented Stuffy, "and the worst is yet to come. We've dissension in our ranks. Pepper and Brick both want to be quarterbacks!"

"Now isn't that too bad?" sung Hemming. "Papa will have to give Pepper an extra mothball and buy him off so as to pave the way for Brick to get the position."

"Say—cut the puns! This thing's no joking matter!" protested Pepper with a good-natured look at his chum. "It's the first time any of us three has ever wanted the same thing. In baseball everything worked out fine . . . but I don't know what's gotten into Brick lately. I wanted to be quarterback first. He ought to want to be something else!"

"All's fair in love and sport, not meaning to take unfair advantage of Shakespeare," said Conway,

laughing. "And what do you want to be, oh mighty Stuffy?"

"Well, if Santa Claus just pulls a little tag out of his whiskers marked 'fullback' it'll satisfy me," grinned Stuffy, a trifle embarrassed.

The fellows reached the high school locker room at this juncture and broke into single file as they ran down the stairs, taking them two at a time. Under the showers, Pepper and Brick, now friendly rivals, glared at each other in mock hatred, while Hemming and Conway took it upon themselves to spread the news of the competition for quarterback to all of the team candidates.

CHAPTER V

THE RIVALRY TAKES A TURN

AT Reedland High, Milford's traditionally bitter opponent in every sport, optimism following the first night's football workout, was running high. Of Reedland's last season State championship eleven, seven veterans remained. And reserve material available for the present season was so strong as to warrant predictions of an even greater football machine. Sport authorities, in advance of an opening game, basing their deductions on a knowledge of Reedland prospects, were free to declare—in the black and white of newsprint—that nothing short of a miracle would keep this school from hammering through to a second state championship. True, no school had ever succeeded in taking the State Interscholastic Title twice in succession but then—no school had, heretofore, enjoyed the athletic foundation to build upon that Reedland seemed to possess. "Actually Embarrassed With Good Ma-

terial," news accounts said, while Max Develon, Reedland coach, was reported as declaring that every one of the seven veterans would be lucky to win their places again this year.

Such news from and about Reedland was almost as cheering to Milford as a weather forecast predicting rain. Members of last year's team could distinctly recall how the powerful Reedland eleven clinched the State honors by trampling Milford underfoot to the tune of 21 to 0. Only the most courageous of stands in the face of almost certain defeat at the hands of a worthier foe had saved Milford from being disgraced by double the score. It was Beef Mellon, bulwark of the Milford line, who had risen to defensive glory that day, breaking through time after time to down Reedland men with the ball or to permit his teammates to do likewise, thus keeping the contest from becoming a rout. Beef said his joints ached from that contest yet . . . and that he himself ached to get even with Reedland this season.

"Reedland used me for a doormat last year. I want to return the compliment with interest when we meet again," Beef had said a thousand times if he had uttered the wish once. But, judging from early reports, the chances of this wish being realized were

about as good as a camel's being able to cross the desert on a glassful of water and a lame foot.

Milford then was more interested in who would make its team than who would win the annual contest between Milford and Reedland. The first happening, with the starting of scrimmage, became one of immediate concern, while the second approaching occurrence was so unpleasant to contemplate that every one sought to forget it. With Milford lacking a quarterback, both substitute and first team quarter having been lost to the varsity through graduation, and Pepper and Brick the only announced candidates for that extremely important position—well, were folks curious to see who'd win out? *Were* they?

The night that Coach Dolan put Pepper in to pilot a team to be tentatively recognized as the varsity and delegated Brick to direct the play of the reserves, news spread about Milford so quickly by word of mouth that a crowd of five hundred spectators appeared as if by magic along the sidelines before the short practice game had been under way ten minutes!

Well known as Stuffy and Pepper and Brick were from having been widely proclaimed as heroes, every move they made was graced with more than ordinary significance. Stuffy, largely on the strength of his

kicking ability, had been placed on the first team squad as fullback, but he was hard pressed by two other men, Pete Arrick and Joe Kline, both of whom had played a year on the varsity and were more seasoned. Kline was shifted to left tackle under this arrangement; Arrick was shoved in at left half, and Conway was given his old berth at right half.

"You fellows have been in training long enough now to begin to show your stuff," the coach told both teams before he sent them out for the practice game. "I'll expect to see some real football this afternoon and those of you who would like to make the first team, remember—I'm watching for you to do something which will justify your going on it!"

By the same token, each player knew as he took the field that, should he make a poor showing, it would count heavily against him. Coach Dolan was shrewd at sizing up a man in action. It had been said of him that he could look at a player in scrimmage once and tell whether there was any hope for that man developing into what he called A-1 material.

"Either they've got it or they haven't," Coach Dolan had been often quoted as saying. "I can't add to their ability. All I can do is to bring it out."

With both teams keyed up to a fighting pitch, the reserves kicked off amid the excited cries of the onlookers whose sympathies were enthusiastically divided between the players on the two elevens. This was to be a contest where individual play would be observed more than team play. And it was an odd whim of fate that Stuffy, capturing the kick-off should be brought to earth on his twenty-one yard line on a fine tackle by Brick!

"Yea, Brick! Yea! Yea! Yea!" lauded his admirers.

"Atta boy, Stuffy!" boomed his supporters.

It was great fun watching members of Milford's Big Three at athletic swords' points with one another . . . and apparently little to choose between their respective abilities . . . each a star in his own way!

Pepper lined up the varsity quickly and called on Conway for a smash at the reserves' forward wall. Conway went tearing through for four yards. On the next play Stuffy reeled off seven yards and a first down around right end. More roars from the sidelines. Using nothing but straight formations, Pepper—radiating snap and energy—drove his team down the field until they were within ten yards of the reserves' goal line and a touchdown. Here,

Brick called time out and gathered the second team about him.

"Listen, fellows! I think I see a way to stop this drive. Pepper gives away where every play is going to go . . . all we've got to do is keep our eyes on him and the minute we see what's going to happen we can break up the varsity plays before they get a fair chance to start 'em!"

The second team member of the Big Three stole a cautious glance about to be sure that no one of the first team was in hearing distance. Then he leaned forward and whispered hoarsely:

"Pepper turns his head just before he signals for the ball to be passed back, and looks in the direction that the play is going to go to size things up. He tips off what every play is going to be. I've watched him. Sometimes he glances back at the man who's going to carry the ball. It's a cinch, fellows . . . just take my tip and we'll stop 'em cold!"

"Play ball!" ordered the referee.

"All right, gang! Only ten more yards to go!" sang out Pepper, confidently, "and four downs to make it in . . . what do you say . . . ?"

The varsity dug its toes into the sod.

"Let's go . . . signals . . . !"

Pepper bent over and held out his hands for the

ball, his head swung around to enable him to glimpse Stuffy, who crouched in the fullback position eagerly . . . and the ball snapped back . . .

Simultaneously with the passing of the ball there was an early and terrific upheaval of the varsity line. A hole opened up between the left tackle and guard that, as Slim Mooney would have said, "You could have driven a horse and wagon through." And through this hole a streak of human lightning charged, striking Pepper with such force that the ball bounded from his hands as he was about to pass it to Stuffy. There was a wild tangle of arms and legs . . . but when this tangle was straightened out by the referee and the arms and legs returned to their rightful owners, Brick was found on the bottom of the heap with the fumbled ball firmly clutched.

The spectators unloosed a tremendous howl. Here was red blooded competition of a kind not often seen! It was as good as a regular scheduled game. And onlookers buzzed with wonderment as to what it was that Brick had told the fighting reserves which enabled them to break up the varsity's big offense. The reserves, overjoyed, pounded Brick on the back and did about everything to show

their appreciation at his strategy except to kiss him. Brick could not help revealing that he was tickled, too . . . and he let Pepper see that he was by a challenging smile which his chagrined pal could not return.

To add insult to injury, it was Dub Eldred, who had never taken going out for any team seriously heretofore, who put the second team on easy street with a splendid forty-yard punt. Eat that, varsity . . . eat that!

But there was more to come. Pepper again took command with the varsity in possession of the ball in mid-field. He called on Arrick, the left half, for a run around right end, but poor Arrick was nailed just as Pepper slipped him the ball. On the next play Pepper attempted to carry the ball himself but managed only a scant yard against the uncanny charging of the reserves' forward wall which shifted in the very path that the play was intended to follow. Desperate, Pepper conferred with Stuffy.

"What do you suppose is wrong?" he asked.

"Search me," said Stuffy, perplexed, "I can't figure it out. They seem to know where every one of our plays is going and they're on to us almost before we can get under way."

"Well—we'll try a forward pass and see what they do to that!" decided Pepper.

He soon found out. The ball snapped back to Stuffy . . . but even then, Pepper's head had instinctively turned to glance out at the left end where Jim Hemming was circling—free. While members of the reserves covered up frantically and arms shot up in an attempt to block the pass, Stuffy hurled the ball at Hemming. But the ball never reached its intended destination.

The quarterback on the reserves took the pigskin in while racing at top speed and, tucking it under his arm, kept right on going toward the varsity goal line —almost fifty yards away—running as though he were being chased by a combination of Indians, cannibals and wildcats.

Brick never stopped until he had placed the ball behind the varsity's goal posts and written "finis" to a page of perfect misery for the men whom Coach Dolan had picked to represent his first stringers. No such cheering or excitement had ever prevailed along the side-lines at a practice game as now took place. Onlookers, eager to bestow garlands on the member of the Big Three who should draw first blood in the friendly competition, gave Brick a great demonstration. And Coach Dolan, looking with dis-

approval on such an outburst of sentiment, called off the rest of the game with the word that his men had "done enough for to-night," ordering them all to the showers.

And that night, it was noised about Milford that Stuffy and Pepper and Brick had left the locker room singly when it had always been their custom to wait for one another and go out together. Could it be that a breach had suddenly sprung up between them? Only time would tell that. . . .

The fact was that Pepper had not felt like facing either Stuffy or Brick after the outcome of the practice game which had ended so sadly for the varsity, his only desire having been to get away by himself—away from the fellow students who had hung about the clubhouse seeking to make more fuel out of the rivalry which had sprung up between him and Brick over the position of quarterback on the first team.

Pepper had sensed that a meeting with Brick, under these circumstances, would be embarrassing to both and then—it must be confessed—Pepper knew that he had somehow been responsible for the downfall of his eleven.

But Pepper's hasty leaving of the locker room without so much as a word to either Stuffy or Brick left his chums in a quandary. Stuffy, dressed first,

waited around a minute for Brick—a bit uncertain as to what he should do. Stuffy was not sure what had prompted Pepper to give them the cold shoulder and, not knowing, he found himself suddenly placed in a position which was awkward, to say the least. If he should leave the locker room in the company of Brick it would probably be assumed that his sympathies had gone to this chum.

It had been on the tip of Stuffy's tongue to commend Brick for his fine play and clever bit of strategy . . . whatever that strategy had been . . . which had turned the tide of battle in favor of the despised reserves. But now it dawned upon Stuffy that such a procedure might prove hazardous. He had better wait until Pepper's real attitude had been determined, else he stood a chance of marring what—to him—had been some wonderful friendships. Until he understood how Pepper and Brick felt toward one another, he must steer a diplomatically impartial course. So it was that Stuffy had changed his mind about waiting for Brick and had left the clubhouse abruptly, pushing through the curious ones at the door who sought to quiz him as he passed.

And now it was Brick's turn to be puzzled—doubly puzzled. In the company of exultant second

team members he had paid little attention to Pepper and Stuffy until he was about ready for the street. Then, as was his custom, he had glanced around for his chums to discover, with a little throb of surprise, that Pepper was gone. Brick soon dismissed this discovery with the thought that Pepper had been in an unusual hurry for some reason he had not had time to explain . . . but, when Stuffy, after lingering by the door for him, had suddenly and inexplicably disappeared, Brick had been brought up with a jolt. What was the idea? What had he done? What had gotten into his pals? Something was wrong, that was sure!

Brick's appearance outside the clubhouse was the signal for a rush his way and an outburst of cheers. He had been the hero of the scrimmage and now, since his chums had walked off on him, he was in the limelight more than ever. Brick tried his best to get away from the crowd, but they clung to him, dogging at his heels, pushing in front, jostling at his side . . . guying, shouting and inquiring.

"Pepper's sore at you, isn't he?"

"Guess you put it over on him to-day!"

"Pretty work, Brick. You'll make the first team yet!"

Brick wisely made not so much as one rejoinder.

He simply would not let himself be drawn to say anything, for he knew that, once he did, it would be magnified and result in trouble. No, if there was anything to be said, let Stuffy or Pepper say it. When the fellows found that Brick intended to remain mute, they let him go. But before he was out of earshot, Brick overheard a Milfordite say: "There's a bust-up, all right, else he'd have denied it. Silence gives consent!"

And Brick, a lump in his throat, could do naught but bow his head and go on his way.

CHAPTER VI

A BREACH WIDENS

COACH DOLAN in reviewing the play had been forced to make a mental reservation that "that boy Brick Mitchell uses his head." Even Coach Dolan was at a loss to know just how Brick had solved the plays of the varsity. He had been loathe to ask any members of the second team what "tip" Brick had given them which had enabled the reserves to put the varsity to rout. Whatever it was, the consequent happenings had served to make one Pepper Lawton a sorry-looking player. And yet Coach Dolan saw great possibilities in Pepper. He believed that Pepper could be developed into a great field general . . . one of those rare quarterbacks who have the faculty of nearly always choosing the right play at the right time. Until the varsity plays had been solved, Pepper had driven the first team down the field with a rhythm and power which had been beautiful to see. The coach had also been pleased with Stuffy's work at fullback . . .

and a summing up of the day's individual performances brought the first optimistic smile which had crossed the mentor's countenance since the opening of football training—but Coach Dolan was alone where he could afford to smile. To-morrow, when he faced the squad, pessimism and gloom would reign in their accustomed places.

Ah, to-morrow!

To-morrow ticked in with an overcast sky and a town that was overcast with gossip. It was three days until Saturday and the first game of the season. This alone was occasion enough for comment, but add thereto much speculation as to what would be the next development in the Big Three affair and any one had an item of human interest worth following up to be "in" on the outcome.

Pepper had forgotten any slight resentment which it might have been natural for him to feel in the competition Brick had afforded him the day before when he started for Milford High that morning. Perhaps nothing would ever have been amiss and the clubhouse incident would have forever remained a thing of the past, had not obliging friends waylaid Pepper to forcibly remind him.

"Hello, Pep!" called one of them. "Seen Brick since last night?"

"No—why?" Pepper turned upon his questioner, curiously.

"He's sure got it in for you, hasn't he?"

"What makes you think so?"

"Think so? Say—you should have seen him when he left the clubhouse last night. He was piping mad. Nobody could get a word out of him."

Pepper considered this information carefully . . . gravely.

"Where was Stuffy?"

"Ho—Stuffy smelled what was coming, I guess. He didn't even wait for Brick. He skipped out ahead."

"But I don't see what cause Brick has to be down on me," mused Pepper. "He certainly had all the best of things yesterday."

"Well, I don't know what he's hot about. I'm just telling you what happened, that's all," volunteered the eager informant.

Pepper resumed his way toward the school with lagging step. This was a nice kettle of stewed prunes! Why should Brick be peeved just because he, Pepper, had left the locker room without saying anything or waiting for him? If Brick was ready to explode over so small an excuse then he was a dif-

ferent sort of a fellow than Pepper had ever imagined. Might be that their competing against one another was bringing out a quality in Brick that hadn't shown up before. Well—the obvious thing for Pepper to do was to find Stuffy as quickly as possible and find out from him just what the situation was. If Brick actually was sore.

"Gee, there's Brick now!" exclaimed the student instigator of trouble with a note of evident glee. "What are you going to do?"

Pepper was on the school campus, rapidly nearing other groups of fellows, among them being Brick. He was conscious of observing heads inclined his way as though Brick were being informed of his approach. Somehow, suddenly, Pepper felt uncomfortably strained. There was no manner in which he could avoid the meeting without every one mistaking his reason for so doing. And yet Pepper realized that he did not know just how to face Brick . . . whether to be prepared for a rebuff or whether to be ready for the old, friendly greeting. This uncertainty caused Pepper to advance toward Brick, eyeing his pal soberly—even searchingly—with the hopes of discerning the actual attitude that Brick held toward him . . . and adjusting himself to this attitude speedily.

Unhappily for both, Brick was watching for the same telltale signs in Pepper with the result that their hesitancy was marked, which—coupled with the strained atmosphere of those about them—caused the two chums to put themselves on the defensive.

For an agonizing moment that seemed hours long, Pepper and Brick looked directly at one another. Then Pepper, Brick unspeaking, resumed his stride past him toward the school building. Brick, staring after Pepper wonderingly, moved his lips as if he would call out . . . but bit them with his teeth instead.

"See—what did we tell you?" one of the student group emphasized in a low voice.

A hum of excitement went the rounds. Brick's eyes began to light up with a slow fire. He shoved his hands in his pockets, watching Pepper until his former chum had disappeared through the main door to Milford High. Then he wheeled about, exclaiming: "Well, I'll be tied to a pup!"

The game with Bloomsburg was all that a practice contest should be. It gave Milford an excellent opportunity to play mostly straight football against foreign opposition and, in so doing, to try out the

various degrees of good, bad and indifferent football talent represented in some thirty-one assorted pairs of arms, legs and—in a few instances—single heads.

Milford played mediocre football, partly due to the weakness of the opposing force, but mostly due to the absence of coherent teamwork.

"Everybody's rotten!" Coach Dolan had told the players at half-time, and he repeated this injunction at the game's conclusion with twenty times the fervor of the first declaration. "Rotten, rotten, rotten!" Then he proceeded to *lay* each individual out in distinctly artistic fashion until Milford "collectively and separately had figuratively no legs left to stand on," this last according to Slim Mooney, who listened to the *callings* from a vantage point outside the locker rooms.

"Boy, I'm tickled pink that all I am is yell leader," Slim told the football crowd later. "I don't have to take any bawling out from anybody. The way the coach talked to you guys I'd think you'd feel like going out and lying down in front of a cyclone or laying your heads on butcher Pete's meat-chopping slab. Wow, I could go out and drink a quart of pure nitroglycerine just from what I heard in the hall!"

"It did sound as though he didn't consider we amounted to much," admitted Conway, ruefully. "Imagine him saying I reminded him of a used postage stamp trying to deliver a letter! And just because he thought I didn't get away with the ball fast enough. . . ."

"Huh! You got off easy," sniffed Kline, at left tackle. "He told me when I missed downing that Bloomsburg fullback that I must have dreamed my legs were cement blocks and that my arms were greased runways for lettings things slide away from me!"

"Pshaw, you fellows didn't get any dose at all," grinned Beef Mellon, jovial center. "The coach informed me that just because I was the heaviest man on the team was no sign that I was the most stationary also. He said that out West they were using earthquakes to move mountains that wouldn't get out of the way . . . and that if I didn't show more pep and go that he'd plant me feet first in some nice garden plot and let me take root and grow there."

"Why didn't you take him up on it?" kidded Slim Mooney. "You'd make a swell spreading chestnut. . . ."

"Say, you—" warned Beef, making a quicker

move than Coach Dolan had doubtless ever given him credit for.

"You catch me first. Then say it," taunted Slim, keeping plenty of space between the Milford center and himself.

The crowd of fellows laughed. They were in a particularly good mood despite their recent *panning.* Coach Dolan had a unique way of telling every player exactly what he thought of his playing without hurting the player's feelings. He often sent the boys into howls of hilarity, but behind the funny things he said was usually a stinging bit of truth which the individuals took home to themselves and made the most of through striving to perfect the defect or weakness criticized. This was the first time during the new football season that the coach had given each boy a piece of his mind, so the occasion was being especially cherished.

"Bawling us out when we beat Bloomsburg fifty-four to nothing," ruminated Stuffy. "That bird's funny!"

With the game, despite the uneven quality of play, nothing more than a walk-away victory for Milford—most of the onlookers' interests had been centered on the alternating of Pepper and Brick at quarterback. Coach Dolan had started Pepper only

to substitute Brick in the second fifteen minutes of play. Pepper went in again at the beginning of the second half, but gave way to Brick during the last quarter, their time in the game being fairly well divided. It was noted that not so much as a word or look was exchanged by these former chums as they took each other's places in the line-up. After the contest, students who liked to compile figures on the playing, determined that Milford had scored 39 of her 54 points while being piloted by Pepper, and that their school team had been held for her only downs while Brick was in the quarterback position. Such figures pointed coldly and conclusively to the fact that Pepper's leadership of the team had proven best. And, these football mathematicians recollected, the eleven had actually seemed to have more life and confidence in the first and third quarters of the game . . . responding to the urge of Pepper with better spirit and smoother working plays. But pshaw! Figures didn't mean much yet . . . the season was still young.

Sharp, curious eyes kept watch of Stuffy, Pepper and Brick in the days that followed. Little was said openly, but there was an atmosphere about Milford High which indicated that the whole school was upset and wondering over what was to be the outcome

of the fued between Pepper and Brick. Folks had observed Pepper occasionally in the company of Stuffy, and Brick also occasionally in the company of Stuffy—but never had any one reported having glimpsed Pepper and Brick together with Stuffy. This observation alone was evidence enough that the break had been definite . . . and lasting.

"Who'd ever have thought that those three fellows would have had a falling out?" asked an older Milford citizen of another. "The whole town's looked up to those boys for the fine example that they have set in sportsmanship and fellowship and courage . . . and now they've had to spoil it all by this streak of jealous rivalry. It's a downright shame!"

Navin City, the next Saturday, put up a much stronger argument against Milford, but met a much stronger team in so doing. Milford triumphed 31 to 6 and Pepper stayed in the entire game at quarterback. There was a vast improvement immediately detectable in his style of play. Only on a few occasions did he betray where plays were going by the turn of his head and Navin City was having all it could do to cope with ordinary matters to say nothing of trying to solve telltale motions . . . so the turn of Pepper's head did no damage. Besides

he was directing a different team—a team which was getting away faster, with more drive and power and precision.

"Beats all what Coach Dolan can do with a squad of lightweights, doesn't it?" asked an enthusiastic admirer, shortly following one of Milford's five touchdowns. "If our line was only heavier I'd almost be willing to wager we'd give the mighty Reedland bunch a big scare by the end of the season. But you know what always happens when a good little man goes up against a good big man. Imagine Dempsey taking on Benny Leonard! Benny might have all the ring science in the world, but, unless he got in a lucky punch, Dempsey would be sure to pound him to pieces in the end."

Ample substantiation was given to the words of this admirer when news came from Reedland that the State champions had ridden over Bloomsburg by a 98 to 0 score, playing three-quarters of the game with their second team. Here was a basis for comparison. Allowing for a certain improvement in Bloomsburg over the week previous when Milford had taken this small school's measure by a 54 to 0 score, Reedland's second team was approximately 44 points better than Milford's varsity! And, as the Reedland paper had said, "the game was a glori-

ous workout for the second string players whom Coach Develon regards as but a shade beneath the caliber of the first team men. It is well for poor Bloomsburg that the Reedland varsity was given an early holiday, else adding machines might have been necessary in keeping tab with the score."

Oh, yes—Reedland loved its football team! The town was far crazier over it than it had been over the baseball nine, and goodness knows Reedland had been loony enough over that. This fall, booked for the last game of the season, Reedland was to have the pleasure of entertaining Milford on the home field. Such an arrangement was much to Reedland's liking. Another State championship would hardly be worth so much as a crushing win over their bitterest rival. Even so, early in the season Reedland players commenced licking their chops in anticipation of the way they would gobble up and tear and chew to shreds the team that Milford might send over to do them battle. In Reedland, news of Milford's 31 to 6 victory over Navin City was greeted with shrieks of laughter.

"Navin City's little better than Bloomsburg," Reedland said. "Our second team could have tripled that score!"

In this, perhaps, Reedland had a bit misjudged

Milford. It had never been Coach Dolan's policy to drive his team in an effort to swamp an opposing force. The coach was satisfied with a moderately topping score. He believed in keying his players up gradually to reach a certain height and not in driving them incessantly, especially against much weaker opposition. Coach Dolan had always declared: "Comparative scores mean nothing," and had pointed to the results of big college games to prove his point. He had warned his players against being affected by overwhelming scores turned in by their coming opponents.

"Beyond indicating that a team has a certain offensive strength, it does not and cannot show what the same team would or could do against us," Coach Dolan often insisted. "A game is just as much lost by one touchdown as twenty, and to win by twenty touchdowns means a great waste of energy. I want my teams to have the drive and power when they need it most . . . and that doesn't mean staging scoring exhibitions just to see how deeply the opposition can be buried. Save some of those pretty touchdowns and line-smashing efforts until you encounter a team worthy of your toughest steel."

With September gone the weeks galloped into late October, nothing of unusual moment happening

except that Pepper had definitely made the team as quarterback, though Brick had been retained on the varsity squad as utility backfield man. In all this time, so far as any one knew, Pepper and Brick had not so much as recognized each other. Coach Dolan, mindful of the feud, had tactfully said nothing, preferring to let the boys work their differences out in their own way just so long as they did not interfere with the playing of the team. He knew that any attempt from an outside influence to right matters quite often only made things worse. At the same time he regarded the affair as serious for it concerned boys who had been such close friends that the hurt of their attitude toward one another must be severe. At least this was the way the whole situation appeared to the shrewdly observant coach.

One night, at practice, he had chanced to remark to Brick: "Did it ever occur to you that you might prove to be a much better halfback than a quarterback?" And the coach had been given an opportunity to test the real fire of the competition between the two members of Milford's Big Three when Brick had replied: "No, sir. It never did!" With Brick it had been the quarterback position or nothing . . . but after Pepper had been selected he had concealed his disappointment.

CHAPTER VII

TWO CHUMS IN TROUBLE

POOR Stuffy . . . he was the one who had been made to suffer most . . . if suffering may be judged by trying to keep on good terms with two fellows who are at swords' points with one another. Stuffy had enough tact to know that he had best keep his mouth shut about Pepper when in the presence of Brick and not make a peep about Brick when he was in the company of Pepper. Each chum had been rather outspoken to Stuffy about the other, each presenting his side of the grievance, and both had asked Stuffy if the other had said anything to him about their feud. Answering such a question as this took diplomacy only a little less than that required by the president of the league of nations. Stuffy did not care to increase the feeling which had sprung up between the two chums. He would have liked to get them together and tell them how silly they both were but he realized, in their present states of mind, such a procedure would be like sicking two

bulldogs on each other. With the Big Three combination so badly torn up, both in play and in comradeship, Stuffy took little pleasure in the fact that he had won a berth on the varsity as fullback. Perhaps this even went quite a way toward explaining what folks had criticized as his ragged and erratic play. Stuffy just couldn't seem to get his heart into his work . . . yet his efforts had been good enough to warrant Coach Dolan's keeping him in position. The coach attributed Stuffy's unsettled play to his comparative inexperience, being of the opinion that all he needed was more seasoning under fire.

Friday night, October 30, was to prove an eventful night for two members of the Big Three . . . just how eventful none of them for a second could have anticipated. It was the evening before Hallowe'en and Brick and Stuffy had gotten behind on their history notebooks. It was at Brick's suggestion that he had met Stuffy and they had gone to the Milford Library after supper to work out their notebooks together. Staying until the library closed, at nine o'clock, the two chums then went downtown to the Sweet Tooth Shop, where each indulged in a soda and some salted peanuts to celebrate the finish of their labors. It was nearing ten o'clock when the

pals turned their steps homeward. Coming to the alley leading past the Mitchell backyard, they swung into it, for it provided a shortcut of fully half a block to both of their homes. There was no moon and the alley was forbiddingly dark.

"Gee, to-night ought to have been Hallowe'en!" said Brick, with a careless chuckle. "You sure could imagine goblins and witches and about everything flying around in this blackness, couldn't you?"

Stuffy laughed, feeling his way.

"You sure could!" he reiterated. "Funny how, as many times as we've gone down this alley in the daytime, we have to be so careful to keep from running into anything or stubbing our toes at night, isn't it?"

"Well, it just proves how few things we notice unless we have to," said Brick. "Now if we'd paid close attention to that history when it was taught to us we wouldn't have had to . . ."

"Oh, dry up!" broke in Stuffy. "I'm so full of history that all I can think of is Alexander the Great and Julius Cæsar and Napoleon. The way I feel now I'd just as soon those ginks had never lived. Or else I wish they were alive to-day so that they could have some of the history they made rammed down their own throats!"

Brick came to a stop in the alley opposite his back yard.

"Well, here's where we part company, Stuffy old scout. See you in the morning, maybe—huh?"

For answer Stuffy laid a hand on Brick's arm.

"Listen!" he commanded. "What's that?"

Behind them, in the direction of the chicken coop on the property of Elmer Sanderson, Milford's distinguished chicken fancier, came a peculiar sound. The noise was that of the disturbed "cut-cut-cuttings" of hens . . . and yet it seemed muffled and smothering. A door creaked.

"Chicken thieves!" gasped Brick. "They're cleaning old Sandy out!"

"Serves him right for making all that fuss over our football landing in his yard," grunted Stuffy, with his usual wont at seeing humor in a serious situation.

"Say—we ought to break this up somehow," said Brick. "Do you suppose we'd have any chance of nabbing those guys?"

"Well—I don't know how good I am at tackling any one in the dark," speculated Stuffy, in a whisper. "But I'm game to try!"

Silently the two chums felt their way to the high chicken wire fence enclosing the yard. They fol-

lowed along this fence in the almost total darkness until they came to the fence adjoining, which closed in the back grounds of the Sanderson property. This fence was low enough to permit their swinging over it. Cautiously they crept toward the large chicken coop, crossing the walk which led from it to the house. They caught the subdued gleam of a flashlight inside and the door ajar.

"Never mind that rooster!" they heard a voice exclaim, hoarsely. "He'll stir up too much of a racket. Come on. We've got the best of the lot now. It's time we were beating it!"

The vague figure of a man emerged from the coop and stood waiting impatiently, with a nervous glance toward the house, for his partner to follow. The second man was smaller. As his accomplice played the flashlight at his feet to enable him to see the way out, Stuffy and Brick—crouched but a few paces away—saw him to be carrying a huge gunny sack, bulging full. The small man also wore a dark, tight-fitting cap.

"You take little Nemo," whispered Stuffy, as the chicken thieves prepared to leave. "I'll tackle the big baby!"

"Righto!" assented Brick, rising up ready for a leap.

The two chicken thieves were totally unaware of any one being near them. They started off in the direction of the side fence over which they could gain access to the alley and make an almost certain get-away in the darkness. But they had not taken more than three steps when both of them felt their legs shot out from under them with jolting suddenness.

"What the . . . ?"

"Hey, let loose!"

"Got him, Stuffy?"

It was a blind struggle in the dark. Brick brought his man to earth and was astraddle of him inside of five seconds . . . but Stuffy, while he downed the larger robber of the two, found himself in difficulty of subduing the fellow who proved powerfully strong. The unexpectedness of the attack had favored the youths . . . yet each realized quickly that they would be no match for these two older men unless outside aid was secured at once.

"Help! Thieves!" yelled Stuffy, clinging to the larger man's back.

The small man rolled over, grappling with Brick, the two rising only to fall upon the sack containing many of Mr. Sanderson's prize winning fowls. The

chickens let out violent squawks of suffocation misery.

Freeing himself from Stuffy and sending his would-be capturer sprawling with a hard blow to the jaw, the larger man sprang to the rescue of his partner. Brick tried to defend himself against the two but was soon forced to relinquish his hold on the other thief. He staggered after them as the robbers ran across the yard, stumbled over the fence and headed for the alley.

Brick, knowing that pursuit was hopeless, turned to his pal.

"Are you all right, Stuffy?"

"Sure. Gee, that big boy packs an awful wallop! Well . . . we saved the chickens anyhow."

Stuffy groped about for the sack and together he and Brick picked it up. Just then the back door to Mr. Sanderson's house swung open and Stuffy and Brick looked into the glare of a flashlight held in the hand of Mr. Sanderson himself.

"So? I thought I heard something going on out here!"

Mr. Sanderson stepped out into the yard and advanced toward the two chums. He was attired in a bathrobe and slippers and at any other time than this would have presented a hilariously funny sight

as the bathrobe was too long for his stubby size, trailing on the ground.

"Trying to pull off a Hallowe'en prank, eh?"

Stunned at this interpretation Mr. Sanderson placed upon their presence, Stuffy and Brick glanced at each other, hardly knowing what to say. Then Mr. Sanderson saw the sack.

"What! Why, you young ruffians, you! What do you mean stuffing my birds in that sack?"

Mr. Sanderson pounced upon the sack and half-carried, half-dragged it to the coop.

"See here, Mr. Sanderson," spoke up Stuffy, "I don't just get what you're driving at . . . about us. But if you're insinuating that we were up to stealing your chickens, you're all wrong. If it hadn't been for us you'd have lost the whole bunch!"

Mr. Sanderson felt about on the wall and switched on a light which the robbers no doubt would have been glad to know was there. He examined the prize fowls with great anxiety, noting that several of them limped and others acted considerably upset. The sight of his injured stock infuriated him. He wheeled about, shaking a stubby fist at the two chums.

"I've had dealings with you boys before. I let

you off once when you deliberately pitched a football into my yard . . . but this time you don't get away so easy. I'm going to have you arrested!"

"Wait a minute," pleaded Brick. "Listen to us while we tell you what happened, won't you? We were going home through the alley when we heard a funny noise in your coop and we skinned over the fence to investigate. . . ."

"Never mind making up any stories, young man. They won't help you one bit."

"He's not making up any stories," denied Stuffy, vigorously. "He's telling the truth . . . and when we got over the fence we saw two men just about to beat it with that bag full of your chickens. I tackled the big fellow and Brick jumped on the little one. . . ."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Mr. Sanderson, scornfully. "No, boys . . . you're going to pay for this pre-Hallowe'en lark and you're going to pay dear!"

"Honest, Mr. Sanderson," insisted Brick, worriedly. "We're not trying to stuff you. We hollered for help and tried to hold onto them until somebody came . . . but they were too much for us."

"Yes, I suppose there were some other fellows in on this stunt, too," surmised Mr. Sanderson. "But

they were lucky enough to make their escape before I came out. Well, we'll let them go for the time being. I guess the police can round up the rest."

"Please . . . if you'll just look around here . . . you ought to find some proof of what we say," entreated Stuffy. "Good-night! What would we want with your old hens?"

"My *old* hens!" fairly screamed Mr. Sanderson. "I want you to understand, young man, that these fowls are the finest blooded stock in the State!"

"Well, that wouldn't make us want them any worse," retorted Stuffy. "You'd better go slow about having us arrested, Mr. Sanderson."

For answer Mr. Sanderson stepped outside and shut the chicken coop door, only to make the discovery that the lock was shattered.

"Something else against you!" he roared, taking a step backward and almost tripping over his bathrobe. "Yes, I think I will go *slow* about having you arrested . . . about as slow as it takes to call the police!"

The little town of Milford awoke the next morning to news of a most astounding nature. The feud between Pepper and Brick was as nothing compared to this. Facts of the case were, according to no less

an authority than Ben Phillpot, chief of police, that Stuffy Owen and Brick Mitchell had been caught red-handed by Mr. Sanderson as they were about to leave his chicken yard last night with a sackful of prize fowls. From information furnished by Mr. Sanderson, the intended theft was a piece of spite work dating back to the time when the members of Milford's Big Three had booted a football into his chicken yard for the mere sport of it and had received a severe reprimand at the hands of the chicken fancier which they seemed to resent. Pepper had evidently effected his escape, in the opinion of Mr. Sanderson, although a subsequent investigation proved that Pepper had been at home all that evening and was not, at least, directly connected with the affair.

State papers seized upon this news just as eagerly as they had reached out for the story of the bandits' capture and glaring headlines told shocked readers of the two boys' fall from standing. Their former brave deed was rehashed and contrasted rather mercilessly with the latest and much-to-be-lamented exploit.

But the most crushing blow of all was the action taken by Principal Pomeroy who, as soon as he

learned of the happening, felt it necessary to place the boys under indefinite suspension.

To their parents, Stuffy and Brick told the whole story . . . the true version . . . and they were believed. The finding of a dark blue cap on the grass near the chicken coop after daybreak had been the only outside clue which gave any credence to their story of apprehending robbers. But Mr. Sanderson was unimpressed by this discovery and was more insistent than ever that full justice be done him and the boys severely punished.

"They think just because they've enjoyed lots of popularity from the people of Milford that they can do just about anything and get away with it," said Mr. Sanderson, bitterly. "Well, it's about time that fellows like this Owen and Mitchell should be made an example of!"

There was one person in Milford who, when he heard the news, sat long in sober thought. He knew that his two chums were not guilty . . . and he wondered if he ought not to go to them . . . to Brick especially . . . and offer to make up . . . and to help both of them any way that he could. But try as he might there was a stubborn pride in Pepper. He could not forget how Brick had snubbed him on the school campus that day and how he had avoided him

from that time on. Now perhaps Brick would miss his friendship more than ever. The three had always stood together through trouble before, each defending the other . . . Pepper felt downright sorry for Stuffy . . . but let Brick see how it felt to fight it out alone. . . !

CHAPTER VIII

BRICK GIVES A TIP

NOVEMBER succeeded October with cooler weather and darker days. The days seemed dark in more ways than one, especially to members of Milford High's football team. They missed Stuffy, and just when they needed him most—when all the stronger teams on the schedule must be met. Somehow, since his suspension from school and athletics, the football eleven had lost fully half of its early season offensive power. Stuffy's presence had been a steadying, inspiring influence—much more so than any one had realized—even Coach Dolan.

No one had really expected that the chicken-thieving case would drag on the way it had. After being kept out of school a week while a thorough investigation was being made, Stuffy and Brick had been permitted to return to their studies, but their suspension from athletics had been permanent . . . at least to last throughout the term. Having been pronounced guilty, action against the boys had been

dropped only after a settlement had been reached with Mr. Sanderson by their parents.

Under the stigma which had been placed upon them, Stuffy and Brick had kept pretty much to themselves, avoiding every one that they possibly could, and not appearing in public beyond their attendance at school. Public sentiment, at first aroused against them by Mr. Sanderson's bitter accusations, had now begun to swing back as the unusually penitent attitude of the boys was observed. Besides, Mr. Sanderson had injured his own case, in the estimation of fair-minded Milford citizens, by getting far more excited about the affair than the actual situation seemed to warrant. Those who did believe the boys guilty of trying to perpetrate a prank upon the chicken fancier by removing his prize stock, felt that Stuffy and Brick had been punished enough.

How Stuffy and Brick felt about the matter was evidenced in a conversation they held some weeks after. They had left the school building one night, standing a moment to watch the football squad as it left the locker room for the customary jog out to Brinkley field. Pepper passed within a few feet of them, with a nod to Stuffy, appearing not to have seen Brick, who stood by his chum's side. Then came Conway who had been shifted to fullback to

fill Stuffy's shoes. Conway stopped a second to chat.

"It's a shame, fellows," he said, indignantly. "We need you worse than poison . . . both of you. Pete Arrick sprained his ankle last night in practice. Looks like he'll be out of the line-up when we meet Orville Academy day after to-morrow. Orville hasn't been stopped this season, you know. We've sure got our work cut out for us!"

"Well, maybe Dub Eldred will get his chance now," grinned Stuffy. "He hasn't been doing so badly on the reserves. I'm sort of pulling for him anyway. Any fellow who gets out for every athletic team for four years deserves a better fate than he has had."

Conway glanced at Stuffy soberly.

"Say—how'd you guess it? It's on the Q. T. yet, but Dub's been moved up to the first team. He works out with us to-night."

"Hurray!" exclaimed Brick, with sincere enthusiasm. "That's almost worth being suspended for. Dub warned everybody to watch his smoke when he got out for football this season. The way he's going I guess there's not going to be any doubt about us seeing it!"

Conway laughed and backed off.

"I've got to be legging it for the field or the coach

will give me a panning. Gee, I'd like to see you guys in uniform! Well, s'long."

Stuffy and Brick watched Conway as he gave chase to the squad, now a straggling speck down the street leading to the field. Then they resumed their steps toward home.

"Do you think you'd recognize that little fellow you tackled if you ever saw him again?" asked Stuffy thoughtfully, referring to the thieves they had tried to capture in Mr. Sanderson's coop.

"Do I?" echoed Brick, stopping short. "Say; I could pick him out of a crowd if he'd grown a beard ten feet long. How about that big boy you tackled?"

"I'm not so sure about him," answered Stuffy, consideringly. "I didn't get such a good glimpse of my man as you did of yours. I had my hands too full trying to hold him . . . and besides, we never did see his face like we did the little fellow's because the flashlight he had always pointed away from him."

"Sandy didn't even try to explain how that cap got in his backyard," said Stuffy. "And Chief Phillpot didn't seem to attach any importance to it, either. Imagine them deciding that the cap belonged to one of our crowd who'd been lucky enough to escape!

And even after they'd investigated the whole neighborhood and hadn't found a fellow to whom it belonged . . . they just dropped the affair after our folks settled things with Mr. Sanderson. I wish Dad hadn't been so anxious to hush matters up."

The day of the football game with Orville Academy dawned cloudy, with a cold wind blowing.

Stuffy and Brick attended the game, sitting quietly on the first row seats near the center of the field. Orville Academy won the toss and chose to kick off. Milford High immediately electrified its supporters by receiving the kick and tearing into the highly-touted Orville team for four straight first downs which carried the ball from Milford's eleven yard line to their opponent's twenty-seven yard line before a fumble by the over-anxious Dub Eldred at left half gave the ball over to the enemy. Milford rooters, during this drive, spotting the Reedland contingent in the stands, had yelled: "What do you think of Milford now?" The Reedland fellows waved their hands at the crowd with good-natured disdain. But Milford had gloated a bit too soon.

Once Orville Academy came into possession of the ball it started a nice little offensive all its own. The Milford team was forced to retrace its steps

over the same ground it had traveled in momentary triumph until, after resisting bitterly, the home eleven was pushed back over its own goal line for an Orville touchdown.

"What do you think of Milford now?" an Orville enthusiast called up to the Reedland bunch, sarcastically.

Orville proceeded methodically to kick the goal after touchdown, getting off to a 7 to 0 lead early in the first quarter of play. Milford kicked off this time and Orville at once started in upon another march toward a touchdown.

Stuffy and Brick exchanged glum glances.

"Orville's got a heavy line like Reedland's," said Stuffy. "Dub's fumble has taken the heart out of the team for another thing and the boys are off their stride. If they don't recover soon, this game will be a rout."

There appeared to be no stopping of the well-oiled Orville machine. It was living up to advance notices. A confident, dashing spirit began to manifest itself as the team pounded its way down the field through the Milford line and around the ends, using nothing but straight football. As time for the quarter was up, the Orville fullback crashed over the Milford goal line for the second touchdown. Try

for a goal was missed and the score stood: Orville 13; Milford 0.

The second quarter served to revive the dying hopes of Milford fans. Receiving the ball from kick-off, Dub Eldred partially redeemed himself for the fumble by returning the pigskin thirty-five yards in the most thrilling open field run of the game thus far. Milford, conscious of the lead it had to overcome, mustered up full fighting strength in launching its attack upon Orville from the mid-field mark. Milford screamed its joy as the team drove Orville back to gain a first down. Pepper was a dynamo of action behind the Milford line, exhorting his players to do their utmost and getting a response from them, too. But Pepper was overly concerned about the working of his backfield . . . so much so that under the heat of this conflict, his old telltale mannerism was returning. Brick noticed it first, from the stands, and shuddered. He saw Pepper turn his head to glance at Conway who crouched, clutching with nervously eager fingers at the clumps of grass. Brick breathed a prayer that no one on the wide-awake Orville team would discern Pepper's give-away as to who was to receive the ball and where the play was to go. He jumped to his feet to cheer as Conway plunged around right end for a seven-

yard gain. Oh, well . . . perhaps Pepper's mannerism was not so noticeable to others as it had been to him. Brick had never heard any one else mention it . . . and surely the coach would have. . . .

"There goes the ball to Dub!" Brick told himself, as Pepper looked around to see if Dub was in position.

Sure enough! Dub took the ball and shot through a hole opened by Beef Mellon, huge Milford center, for four yards and another first down. Amid the frenzied cheers of the crowd, Orville called time out. An Orville player stretched out on the ground apparently all in. While several teammates worked over him the Orville fullback and captain gathered the rest of his eleven about him.

With play resumed, Pepper gave the ball to Kline, who had been called out of his position at left tackle to plug the backfield hole at right half following the shake-up due to Stuffy's suspension and Arrick's injury. Kline headed for the right end of the line but found the Orville line shifting to meet him and the secondary defense closing in. He attempted to cut in short as he saw a small opening, but three Orville men veered and struck him almost simultaneously, throwing Kline for a three-yard loss. The Orville stands roared their joy.

Brick shook his head grimly.

"That's too bad," sympathized Stuffy. "Kline should have followed his interference. He cut in there and they nabbed him."

Brick eyed his chum with an expression of surprise.

"Kline was a goner, no matter where he went. And the whole team is from now on no matter how hard it tries. Watch Pepper."

"What do you mean?"

"They're on to him."

Stuffy settled his eyes curiously upon Pepper, studying every motion. He saw Pepper kneel near the center, saw him shout out his signals, saw him turn his head to glimpse Dub Eldred. . . .

"There! Now watch that Orville line!" directed Brick.

As the ball snapped back the Orville line swung quickly and surely to the left, not waiting to see what direction the play might go. It seemed as though Dub, starting around that end, was buried under half of the opposing team, such a wall did he encounter.

"What's the answer?" asked Stuffy, quite bewildered.

"His head, you boob!" cried Brick. "I should

think any one could see that. Remember the night we reserves stopped you? That was the reason . . . Pepper's dead give-away. He got almost over it for a while . . . but now that he's in a tight game he's doing it again."

On the third down, with some fifteen yards to go, Pepper called for a trick play . . . a play which depended for its success upon perfect deception. Stuffy and Brick recognized what the play was going to be as soon as the formation started. Jim Hemming, right end, was to drop back of the line and circle around, taking the ball from Conway, the fullback, as Conway charged around right end. Hemming was to continue on in a wide half-moon, tearing round left end where he was to pick up interference. This trick play had only been used twice during the season and had averaged a gain of thirty-two yards. Such a gain now would put the ball on Orville's three-yard line. It was worth trying.

It was a throbbing moment for Stuffy and Brick. They leaned forward anxiously, hopefully as Pepper barked out the signals. Then both uttered a groan. Pepper had turned his head toward the right side of the line, spotting out Hemming.

Conway took the ball and Hemming raced back to meet him. But Hemming was closely followed by

the Orville left end. As Conway went to slip Hemming the ball, the Milford right end was dragged down from behind, tackled so fiercely that he fumbled. An Orville player scooped up the fumble, heading for the Milford goal but was dropped by Pepper just as it appeared that he had a clear field.

"What did I tell you?" said Brick, disconsolately.

The Milford stands sat in deep dejection. Stuffy gave no answer, sitting looking out over the field, his chin in his hands. The first half came to a close soon after, saving Milford from being scored on again as Orville had carried the ball inside Milford's ten-yard line.

For three good minutes Stuffy and Brick remained, unmoving, listening to the din being made by the wild Orville Academy rooters, who were shouting: "On to Reedland! Good-by Milford!" Then Stuffy turned abruptly to Brick.

"Somebody ought to tell Pepper," he said, pointedly, then adding, with well-directed diplomacy, "For the sake of the team."

"That's just what I was thinking," returned Brick, hesitantly. "I wonder . . . ?" He glanced about, sighting Slim Mooney, Milford yell leader. Slim chanced to catch Brick's eye at that moment. "Oh, Slim! Here a minute, will you?"

"Sure thing!" The colorfully attired yell leader made his way through the crowd, all eyes following him, until he reached Brick.

"I'd like you to deliver a note," informed Brick, taking out a pencil and tearing a leaf from his pocket notebook.

"Mooney's Quick Messenger Service at your disposal," replied Slim, with mock courtesy. "Who's the girl?"

"Get out!" retorted Brick, writing. "No girl to this. Here!" He folded the piece of note paper and wrote across it hurriedly the name "Pepper." Mooney took the proffered note, glancing at the scribbled addressee.

"Holy smoke!" he gasped.

"Never mind the smoke," ordered Brick. "Get that note to Pepper as soon as you can, please. It's mighty important."

Slim needed no further bidding. He saluted in soldierly fashion, wheeled about and cut across the field on the run toward the Milford bench.

Stuffy reached over and patted Brick on the shoulder, appreciatively. Brick looked away and gritted his teeth, feelingly.

"I—I don't think we've got much chance anyway," he said.

Across the field, Pepper looked up surprisedly when he heard his name spoken and had a slip of paper handed him by the Milford yell leader.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Love note from your former sweetheart," responded Slim, bound to get in his wit.

Pepper unfolded the paper, giving Slim an icy glare. Milford team members growled their disapproval.

"Get out of here and stay out!" snapped Coach Dolan, pushing Mooney away. This was no time for any nonsense. Milford two touchdowns behind. . . .

Teammates crowded about Pepper with natural curiosity as he stared down at the note. What Pepper saw was this:

Pepper—

Just a tip. Stop looking around before every play. You're putting Orville wise to every move we're going to make. Brick.

Pepper's face turned crimson. He crumpled the note in his hand and backed away from the group of eager questioners.

It was soon apparent to Stuffy and Brick that Pepper had taken the tip. Pepper was even crafty

enough to turn his head in the opposite direction from which a play was going, throwing the Orville line entirely out of position so that the Milford backfield men with the ball loped around the ends for big gains. The Milford fans saw a team rejuvenated. Completely baffled, being constantly fooled as to where a play was going, the Orville eleven went to pieces. . . . Milford driving down the field and going over the line for a touchdown seven minutes after the third quarter had opened. Conway kicked goal to bring the score to 13-7 as the crowd roared.

"What do you think of Milford now?" a Milford supporter began to chant again. The Reedland contingent laughed heartily and applauded.

Maddened by having been scored on, Orville attempted a come-back but met a Milford line now which was holding grimly. Orville made a first down, but was finally forced to punt. This time Orville paid no heed to the supposedly telltale signs of the Milford quarterback, confining itself to the business of stopping Milford plays after they were started. Putting up a stern defense, Orville clung to its one touchdown lead tenaciously . . . abandoning all hope of defeating Milford by a topheavy score, as had been their early intention.

Late in the last quarter, Milford, making its supreme effort, battled the ball down to within three yards of Orville's goal. Pepper's generalship of the team on this drive had been thrilling to see. . . . Another play would have put the ball over. At least Conway and Kline and Eldred . . . backfield warhorses . . . all said that it would have . . . but Time, the arch enemy of Milford on this memorable afternoon . . . rung down the curtain on Milford's first defeat of the season for the final score of Orville 13; Milford 7. Orville's record was still clear . . . but, oh, how she had earned that victory! But, had she? There were people in Milford who knew that Orville hadn't actually earned the victory . . . in the finest sense of the word. Stuffy knew it . . . and Brick knew it . . . and Pepper knew it most of all.

Although Pepper saw Stuffy after leaving the locker room that night, he made no mention of having received the note from Brick. Pepper felt greatly depressed and nothing that Stuffy could say served to console him. Stuffy had been hoping that Brick's note might be the beginning of a reconciliation. He observed now, with regret, that the two chums were apparently as far apart as ever. Pepper

had accepted Brick's tip as an impersonal matter which—in truth—it was. Brick had acted for the good of the team and not because Pepper was Pepper. But each, although neither would confess it, had felt a peculiar pull toward the other.

CHAPTER IX

AN IMPORTANT PHONE CALL

MILFORD fans were interested in reports the next week from Reedland where the game with Orville Academy was being played.

The final returns from the Reedland-Orville game gave the Milford fans an opportunity to shout their astonishment and dismay.

REEDLAND 67, ORVILLE 0!

"Gee, Reedland's no high-school team. They're a regular college bunch!" grumbled Slim Mooney. "No wonder they can run up such scores when the first team doesn't play only about every other week and then only part of the game. They're always fresh as cucumbers."

Members of Milford's varsity also had some ideas on Reedland's latest sensational victory.

"We mustn't forget that the Orville fellows practically played themselves out when they went up against us last week," reminded Pepper, hopefully.

"They wanted to keep their winning slate clean just as much as we did, and they paid the price. I'll bet they weren't half the team to-day that they were when they played us . . . which would naturally make them an easy mark for Reedland."

State papers were unanimous in declaring, after the Orville game, that nothing could stop Reedland from annexing the State Interscholastic Football Championship for the second time.

Coach Dolan had attended the Reedland-Orville game and returned to Milford with some ideas on the building of a defense to cope with Reedland's steam-rolling style of attack. Up to Thursday of that last, anxious week Coach Dolan worked into the darkness behind closed gates with his eleven. And whatever he had managed to do to them, it was observed that the boys all radiated confidence and enthusiasm when they departed early Thursday afternoon via motor-cars for the scene of the big battle now but two short days away. It was Coach Dolan's plan to have the boys work out on the Reedland field Thursday and Friday. The workouts, of course, were to be of the lightest character, but they would at least familiarize the fellows with the gridiron they were to play on.

After giving their team a rousing send-off, Mil-

ford citizens feverishly set about getting their affairs in order so that they could troop to Reedland early Saturday in time for the great clash. Stuffy and Brick watched their former teammates depart, both trying hard to swallow lumps which persisted in coming up in their throats.

"See you Saturday!" Brick called, with an attempt at cheeriness.

"Give 'em fits, gang!" entreated Stuffy as he shook hands all around.

In Reedland, following the late Thursday afternoon practice, Pepper sauntered off by himself.

On passing a newsstand, Pepper was reminded to get a paper and glance over the last minute reports on the respective strength of the two football teams. He stood by the curb, turning to the sporting section as the newsboy watched him curiously.

"If you'll excuse me, Mister, I think your picture's in that paper," ventured the boy.

"That so?" inquired Pepper, good-naturedly. "Well, that's funny!"

"You'll find it on page seven amongst the ads," volunteered the boy.

"That's a fine place for it I must say!" exclaimed Pepper, thumbing the paper to the place directed. As he turned to page seven, Pepper's eye caught

part of a heading which caused him to turn back, impulsively. He stood reading a moment, eagerly, eyes widening.

"What's the matter—can't you find it?" asked the boy.

"Yes—but I've found something lots more important," announced Pepper, excitedly. "Say, son, is there a telephone near here?"

"Sure. We got one in the stand."

"Mind if I use it? I want to put in a long distance call!"

"No . . . go right ahead. Gee, Mister . . . what did you see in that paper? Somebody dead or somethin'?"

Brick had just finished supper and was sitting at the living-room table doing some more work on his history notebook when the telephone rang. He answered it.

"Reedland calling," informed the operator. "One minute please. . . ."

"Reedland!" Brick thought. "Why, who could be calling me from . . . ?"

"Hello! Is this Mr. Brick Mitchell speaking?"

"Yes . . . what . . . ?"

"All right. Go ahead!"

Brick stood, holding the receiver, listening to the

whining of the wires across the forty-eight miles . . . and wondering. . . . Finally a voice, a startlingly familiar voice.

"Hello, Brick? . . . This is Pepper."

Brick sagged up against the wall and caught his breath.

"Y-y-yes?"

"I'm sorry to bother you but I couldn't reach Stuffy. He was out some place. . . ."

"Oh—a—that's all right."

"Listen . . . I've just got next to something . . . entirely accidental . . . that may mean a lot to you!"

"Is—is that so?"

"A news item . . . in the Reedland *Evening News* . . . it tells about the Reedland police catching two chicken thieves!"

Brick straightened up as if the receiver had contained an electric shock.

"What? It does? Gee, whizz! You don't say!"

"Yes—it goes on to tell about them being notorious . . . operating all through this section of the country . . . stealing prize stock and taking it into other States and selling it. Sounds like the guys you said . . . er—a—I mean, *Stuffy said,* were trying to get away with old Sandy's birds."

"Wow! That's the greatest news I ever heard! It pos-i-tive-ly is! Mother! Dad! Listen to this . . . Pepper's . . ."

"Hey, wait a minute. Tell them about it after I get off this line. I'm paying for this call—you're not!"

"Excuse me, Pep. Go ahead. Shoot! What else?"

"Well—I just thought it would be a good stunt for you to get hold of Chief Phillpot and Mr. Sanderson and your father and Stuffy and his father and come yourself . . . right to-night . . . to Reedland and investigate this thing!"

"Say—that's a great idea. That's just what we'll do! I'm ever so much obliged, Pep."

"Oh, that's all right . . . I was doing it for Stuffy. It might just be possible that he might get cleared of that chicken stealing business in time to get in the game against Reedland. Bye, bye!"

"But listen, Pepper . . . I . . ."

It was no use. Brick heard the receiver click up at the other end of the line. He hung up at his end, despondently. So, that was the only reason Pepper had put him next. . . . Well, it didn't make any difference what the reason had been . . . the main thing was in knowing about it. Brick quickly

acquainted his folks of the news and—within one hour after Pepper had called—an automobile, comfortably packed, was speeding for Reedland.

On Stuffy's insistence, the cap which had been found in Mr. Sanderson's backyard the morning following the chicken stealing episode was taken along. In the office of the Reedland jail, a farmer by the name of Blacker who lived on the Strawton pike out of Reedland, identified the dark, tight-fitting cap as that worn by the smaller one of the two men who had robbed his hennery. The men themselves, Stuffy and Brick were able to help identify. Their chicken thefts had been so numerous and the witnesses against them were so many that the two thieves finally made a complete confession which, in itself, absolutely exonerated the boys.

No humbler individual ever existed than the aggrieved Mr. Elmer Sanderson, Milford's distinguished chicken fancier. He went himself to Principal Pomeroy and straightened it all out so that the two boys would be eligible to play in the game against Reedland. He even pledged himself to return and see the game, promising that he would learn enough about the rudiments by Saturday to have a fair understanding of it from a spectator's point of view.

Saturday morning, the day of days, arrived all too soon. It brought a pitter-patter with it which beat a tattoo on the Y. M. C. A. roof and awakened the Milford team to the unpleasant realization of rain. The wet weather was greeted with groans of dismay until Coach Dolan dispelled the gloom by declaring: "Cheer up, fellows! This is great! We're Reedland's match to-day. Our light line can hold them with a slippery condition underfoot or I miss the best guess I ever made. And our fast, shifty backfield should not be slowed up as much as their heavier backfield men. Let her rain!"

"Wonder what Pepper is doing?" Stuffy said, suddenly. "I'd like to see him."

Brick's face sobered.

"Then you'd better hunt him up," he said, bluntly. "Pepper's not likely to come after you while you're staying with me."

Stuffy hesitated at the door.

"You're not really sore at Pepper, are you?" he ventured.

Brick hesitated, then kicked at the metal leg of the two-decker bed.

"Well, no—not exactly . . . but he's got to come to me and apologize first. . . . I tried to make up with him and he . . ."

"Oh, I see," said Stuffy, gently, stepping out and closing the door.

Coach Dolan had been particularly pleased with the last light workout of the team on the Reedland gridiron Friday afternoon. The morale of the team picked up easily fifty per cent because of the reinstatement of Stuffy and Brick. Stuffy, in celebration of his return, averaged forty yards in punting practice. Brick had been drilled in the position of left half because though Pete Arrick was back in the line-up, his ankle was yet none too strong.

"This battle is going to be largely won or lost by what account you fellows on the line give of yourselves," the coach had emphasized on more than one occasion as he taught them the special system of defense he intended to employ against Reedland.

CHAPTER X

AGAINST THE MIGHTY REEDLAND

FIVE thousand people is more than a fair-sized crowd at a high school athletic contest. . . . But there were actually more than this number present when it came time for the Reedland-Milford game to be called! Fifteen hundred of this surprising total had journeyed from Milford to witness their favorites go up against tremendous odds . . . odds which sporting authorities said could not possibly be surmounted. Milford had been counted out and put away in moth balls before the contest had even begun. Some might even have argued that there was little use in the game being played except to establish the definite results as a matter of record. With the outcome so finely estimated in advance, it was really remarkable that so many people were willing to come out and stand or sit in a damp, falling mist while twenty-two football gladiators, eleven on a side, stamped each other into the mud for sixty

long minutes. Ah, but it was the stamping that they liked!

In the dressing-room, as the whistle sounded, Coach Dolan gave his last-minute instructions.

"Arrick goes in at left half," he directed. "Conway moves to his old position at right half. Stuffy, of course, at full. Kline at left tackle. Eldred and Brick on the bench to start. Rest of the team as was. Nothing more, gang! You know what to do. DO IT!"

Pepper, acting captain, lost the toss. Reedland chose to receive and Pepper chose the south end of the field, though there was really little choice in this as the entire field was soggy, part of it being under water.

As the referee's whistle screeched the Milford line lunged forward, taking care to keep behind the kicker until Stuffy's toe sent the ball skimming on a low arch, far into Reedland territory. Several of the players on both sides slipped and fell heavily, splashing mud and water in doing so.

The big battle was actually on!

A Reedland player caught the twisting pigskin and fell in behind his interference, getting under way toward the Milford goal, almost the length of the field away. He did not go far. Tearing over the

ground with astounding speed considering the slippery going, Jim Hemming, Milford's right end, crashed into the interference, spilling three men—while Kline, left tackle, following up—downed the man with the ball in a skidding tackle on Reedland's seventeen-yard mark.

"Yea, Hemming! Yea, Kline! Yea, yea, yea!" roared fifteen hundred Milfordites in a frenzy. This was great—the mighty Reedland stopped on the kick-off almost in the shadow of her goal posts!

Reedland, however, seemed totally undisturbed about Milford's burst of speed and spirit. The championship eleven set out at once to show of what stuff it was made. And the light Milford line began at once to shift to meet the attack which it had been trained to anticipate. Wily Coach Dolan had known that, if he left his line in such a position that Reedland could batter and batter against it . . . there would soon have been nothing left of the defense. Reedland early awakened to the fact that it was running up against nothing solid. The Milford line appeared to be like a sieve until a Reedland play started through. Then the way was suddenly and quite effectively obstructed. After Reedland had barely made two first downs following desperate work, further handicapped by the treacherous condi-

tion of the sod, the crowd also commenced to realize that it might be going to witness an honest-to-goodness football clash instead of the much-prophesied slaughter.

"Well, what do you know about that?" a Reedland supporter exclaimed, in dumbfounded surprise, as the Reedland kicker dropped back to punt on their fourth down after the team had made only six yards in three tries.

Milford fans, sensing that Milford was taking Reedland's measure, leaped to their feet with a wild outburst.

Stuffy captured the punt on his twenty-one-yard line, the pigskin, wet and slippery, almost sliding from his grasp. He dropped in behind Conway and Arrick as interference. For fifteen yards Stuffy sidestepped and slipped and plunged, then—his interference gone—he splashed over the water-sogged earth on his own.

"Atta boy, Stuffy! Atta boy!" yelled Brick.

Stuffy heard the voice and recognized it, even above the din. It seemed to give him new impetus. He jabbed out an arm and pushed off the tackle of a frenzied Reedland player who drove at him. But a second tackler, falling in front of him, brought Stuffy to earth and out of bounds on Reedland's forty-two-

yard mark. The stands gave him a terrific ovation. He had completed a thirty-seven-yard run . . . and Reedland—haughty Reedland—was distinctly up in the air!

Crazed with joy at their showing thus far, the Milford team lined up, eager to go into action against their highly touted rivals. On the first play, Pepper slammed the ball against Conway's stomach and the right half ripped through the center of Reedland's line for six yards. Beef Mellon, who had opened up the hole, lay on his side and watched Conway leap over him . . . then broke into loud laughter.

"Huh! Reedland—they're not so much, guys! Come on, let's go . . . a touchdown!"

Pete Arrick, favoring his injured ankle, drove three yards around left end. Stuffy made it a first down with two yards off tackle. How the Milford stands did howl! And how dazed the Reedland crowd did look!

The players by this time were caked in mud, gruesome spectacles—their faces streaked with black; their jerseys stained and soaked.

Inspired as had been Milford's great opening drive against Reedland, when the team which had not been rated to have a chance against the State's

mightiest eleven, had literally played Reedland off her feet, onlookers were sure this drive just simply could not last.

Rising up with the wrath of a parent about to spank a naughty child, Reedland set herself grimly to the task of reëstablishing her threatened laurels. The Reedland line threw itself into the Milford forward wall and fought with a concentrated fury to get at the man with the ball. But Reedland was not able to recover the pigskin until Milford had penetrated what had come to be known as "the forbidden territory" . . . the ground inside Reedland's fifteen-yard mark . . . something that no other team had done that season.

When the referee gave the ball over to Reedland on the home team's twelve-yard line, a heart-rending groan went up from the Milford stands. The team had missed scoring another first down by less than a yard. And the remarkable drive had given their supporters reason to hope for a touchdown. Now, for the first time during the game, Reedland fans settled back in their seats with sighs of relief. Milford's big bolt was shot. The game would be Reedland's from now on.

Indeed, it did appear as though the Reedland crowd had figured rightly. Instead of punting, Reed-

land started at once to eat up ground on straight line plunging and end runs . . . Milford resisting stubbornly the while. The first quarter ended, scoreless, and the fight was continued. Nearer and nearer to the Milford goal the Reedland steam-roller pounded and puffed. But when the Milford twenty-yard line was reached, Reedland found the way heroically blocked. The stands gasped as they saw that Reedland was forced to abandon a try at touchdown and make an attempt at a field goal instead. It was near the end of the first half . . . almost thirty minutes of play . . . in all of which time the far-famed high-scoring machine had been held to a negligible zero. Norton, Reedland full-back, partially redeemed his team by spinning the mud-spattered ball between the Milford goal-posts, putting Reedland in the lead, 3 to 0. But there the half ended.

"I'm downright proud of you, fellows!" were the first words of Coach Dolan's when the tired but happy warriors had reached the sidelines amid one of the greatest dins Reedland field had ever heard. The crowd was almost in hysterics over the unexpectedly powerful showing of the Milford eleven. "You're heaping yourselves with glory," the coach added, more generous with his compliments than any

one could remember his having been before. "Reedland's gone stale. You're the big team to-day!"

As the intermission was about half over, a sudden laughing roar from the crowd called the attention of the players to the field. Strutting over the trampled earth, head held high with all the arrogance of his blue-blooded ancestry, stalked a prize rooster! He seemed conscious of the fact that he was on parade, enjoying his promenade far more than being on exhibit at a poultry show. A little white banner had been fastened about his neck and hung down over his wings. On the side of this banner, the following words appeared, plainly visible at considerable distance:

I'VE GOT SOMETHING TO CROW ABOUT
—WHAT DO YOU SAY—REEDLAND?

On the sidelines, coaxing his prize rooster along on the triumphal march, crouched a stubby man that all Milford recognized as Mr. Elmer Sanderson. To show his appreciation of the applause that greeted him, the swaggering rooster stood to his full height, stretched his neck and screeched, "Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

Stuffy and Brick probably got a bigger kick out of the little spectacle than any one else in the

crowd . . . but somehow they didn't see so much humor in the antic. Their eyes went moist.

"Sandy . . . he's all right," mumbled Stuffy, turning away.

So disgusted was the Reedland coach with the performance of his first string men that, when the last half opened, he sent his entire second team in against Milford! The Reedland varsity was left, sitting on the bench, peeved enough to bite tenpenny nails in two, after having received the most burning of tongue lashings. Under such circumstances, the second team went out to show the first team how it should be done.

But here was one time where understudies were as powerless as the principals had been. Though the Reedland seconds drove fresh and tirelessly at the Milford line, they could not keep up an uninterrupted advance. It was in the third quarter that Stuffy's great kicking time and again saved Milford. Standing in water or slimy mud, his footing none too certain, Stuffy had sent back long punts—keeping the ball always far away from Milford's goal when Milford had been unable to carry it farther. Twice the Reedland second team had smashed its way into Milford's ten-yard line and lost the ball on downs . . . and on these two occasions

Stuffy's punts had been good for more than fifty yards. Seeing this the Reedland first team fairly bit their finger-nails with the desire to get back into the game. This was just what the coach wanted, a varsity so mad that it would tear through all opposition when he gave it another chance.

End of the third quarter found the ball in Reedland's possession on their forty-yard line.

"All right, first team!" barked the Reedland coach; "now let's see a massacre!"

The Reedland varsity men tossed off their blankets and raced out on the field while Reedland fans filled the air with noise.

"Come on, Reedland! Show your stuff! What's the matter with you to-day?" called an admirer.

On the Milford bench, Coach Dolan reached over, tapping Eldred and Mitchell on the shoulders.

"Dub, take Conway's place. He's all in. Brick, go in for Arrick. Make it snappy!"

Dub and Brick trotted out on the field together, Milford rising to welcome them.

"Oh, boy . . . looky there! There's Brick! The Big Three's in the game again. What do you say, Milford?" screamed Slim Mooney, doing a handspring in the mud and landing in a puddle of water.

"Yea, yea, yea!"

CHAPTER XI

MILFORD'S GREAT FIGHT

THE fellows had faith in the combination of Stuffy, Pepper and Brick . . . and they had a cordial liking for Dub Eldred who was getting his first chance in real competition after four years of trying to make a team.

Reedland, over-anxious to make a killing, fumbled on the first play! When the human pile disentangled, big Beef Mellon was found on the bottom clutching the begrimed pigskin lovingly. Oh, what a roar the Milford fans gave him!

This was Milford's biggest and last chance—their ball on Reedland's forty-yard line and a little less than fifteen minutes to play.

Brick's heart skipped beats as he heard Pepper calling his signal . . . a run around end . . . a run around end . . . sixteen . . . twenty-three . . .

Brick lunged forward, held out his hands, felt Pepper jam the ball into his arms, saw an opening, dodged through . . . was hit . . . knocked half-

falling . . . recovered his feet . . . slipped . . . almost dropped flat . . . heard the crowd yelling . . . and then went down under what seemed to be a swarm of flying bodies. Straightening up and looking about he saw that he had gained eleven yards.

"Bully work!" Stuffy screamed in his ear.

"Come on!" barked Pepper, harshly, "get into it! Signals!"

Again Brick heard his signal called . . . as if in a dream. "What's Pepper think he's doing?" Brick asked himself. "Calling on me twice in succession like that. Has he gone off his bean?"

But Brick responded, plunging through a hole in the line made by Kline who was playing a whale of a game at left tackle. Three yards more! The ball on Reedland's twenty-six-yard line!

Then Dub Eldred got his chance to carry the pigskin and added another three yards on a drive around left end.

Frantically Reedland braced herself. On the next play, Reedland broke through and downed Stuffy for a two-yard setback. Dub Eldred was good for but a scant yard on the third down. With six yards needed for a first down, Pepper called upon Brick.

"He's going to make me the goat if we don't make

our downs," thought Brick as he heard his signal. Something red flashed up before his eyes.

Brick took the ball from Pepper, head bent low and knees working up and down with pile-driver force. He shot savagely against the Reedland line, bounced back, kept to his feet despite the arm of a tackler wound about one leg . . . and dragged and fought his way until struck with great force from behind.

"Great work, Brick! You made it!" Pepper screamed at him, helping Brick to his feet.

"Yes, you . . . !" Brick cried, hotly, as he was shoved back into position.

The Milford fans were now almost overcome with excitement. They had never pictured their team actually outplaying, outfighting and all but beating the super eleven of the State! But Milford, pinching themselves to be sure they were seeing right, was now entrenched on Reedland's sixteen-yard line with four brand-new downs in which to attempt a crossing of the enemy's goal.

"Fight 'em, Big Three, Fight 'em!" entreated Milford, giving Stuffy, Pepper and Brick much of the credit for their team's marvelous advance.

"What did I tell you? We're going to make a touchdown, gang! A touchdown on mighty Reed-

land!" exhorted Beef Mellon, a grinning, dripping specimen of bulky strength. The confident tone of his voice added to the team's resolve. Yes, Milford was going over.

Dub Eldred hurled himself at the Reedland line and wriggled through for two yards. Stuffy smashed around end on a wide run which gained one more. Third down and seven yards to go.

Pepper called his backfield men together while Mellon and Kline and Hemming came in off the line for a hurried consultation.

"What'll it be?" he asked. "We've used nothing but straight football. Shall we try a short pass?"

"Use your own judgment," said Mellon. "We'll make it all right."

"But Reedland's holding now like a stone wall. I don't want to take a big chance unless. . . ."

"Play ball!" ordered the referee. "Play ball or take a penalty!"

"Signals!" shouted Pepper.

Time was getting short and Reedland's goal line was only thirteen yards away.

Brick somehow knew that Pepper was going to give the ball to him. Another run around end . . . seven yards to go. He'd made the necessary yards before . . . but not inside Reedland's forbidden

territory. Wow, how it must hurt Reedland to have its last fifteen yards invaded! And this made twice that Milford had done it. But this time Milford would do more than that . . . Milford would . . .

Back came the ball and away went Brick. But the Reedland team, urged on by the mad entreaty of their fans, charged forward like a tornado, smothering Brick's interference and nabbing him for a four-yard loss!

Last down and eleven yards to go!

The Milford stands groaned. Their team didn't quite have the necessary punch. Almost . . . but not quite. It was too much to expect. The boys had already far outdone themselves.

But there was still hope . . . three minutes of play left.

The Milford team spread out. Out at right end, Jim Hemming strained forward. A great murmur went over the crowd.

"They're going to try a pass!"

The ball snapped back to Stuffy.

"Hold 'em, line! Hold 'em!" Pepper begged.

Stuffy held the ball poised ready to throw and took a quick look over the field to see which one of his teammates might be free. He drew back his

arm, about to hurl the ball at Hemming, but—as he did so—a Reedland man loomed up in front.

"Stuffy!" screamed Brick.

How Stuffy heard his pal's frantic yell above the roar of the crowd was almost miraculous . . . but there was Brick, standing on Reedland's goal line, and not a man within three yards of him! Stuffy side-stepped to dodge a Reedland player who sought to block the throw . . . then he shot the ball on a straight line to Brick.

The din that broke loose would have wrecked any radio set had it been tuned up to receive it. For an instant as the Milford players saw the ball on its way to Brick, they leaped with joy. It was but a step over Reedland's goal line and Brick was entirely free.

The ball skimmed into Brick's outstretched arms, struck his chest . . . and, woe unto Milford! . . . bounded out!

So certain had Brick been that he would catch the ball that he had already started to step back over the line and plant it down for a touchdown when the fumble occurred.

There was a mad scramble for the ball, Reedland recovering.

A deathly stillness fell over the Milford stands.

Tears of disappointment streamed down the faces of the Milford team. A few of the members were bitter at Brick for the fumble. And one of these was Pepper.

"Well of all the boobs that ever lived, you're it!" he razzed. "Right in your hands and you muffed it . . . cost us the greatest game we'll ever play!"

The referee brought the ball back to where the line of scrimmage had been, on Reedland's seventeen-yard line, and gave the ball to Reedland.

Mockingly, now that the danger was over, Reedland prepared to kick and get the ball away from their end of the field. There was nothing that would take the heart out of Milford more than this . . . if all of the heart had not been taken out already.

Dejectedly the Milford line strained against Reedland's as the ball went back. Then came the sickening thud as the pigskin met the kicker's toe. Joyously the Reedland ends followed down under the punt, watching the ball as it spiraled through the gathering dusk, striking the ground on Milford's forty-five yard line and rolling five yards more to come to rest in a pool of muddy water.

Stuffy, having failed to get under the punt which had carried farther than he had anticipated, rushed up to grab the ball. Brick, tearing in from the other

side with demonlike fury, threw himself in front of Stuffy, blocking his attempt to recover it.

"What's the matter with you?" gasped Stuffy, struggling to his feet as a wail of protest went up from the sidelines.

Pepper, lurching up, was also hurled aside.

"Don't touch it!" he screamed, above the din. "Don't you dare touch it till I say so! I know what I'm doing!" Brick reached over and grabbed Pepper by the arm as the Reedland ends came charging down on them. "Listen, Pep! When I yell, pick up that ball and run like Sam Hill! Stuffy—you go along for interference!"

"You're crazy. . . ! Let me . . . !"

Holding them back, the three clawing for the ball but no one touching it, Brick waited until the Reedland ends arrived. The ends, noting this peculiar jockeying, could only laugh. What sort of a fuss were these rival players making over a ball which had become dead? The game was as good as over. It was doubtful if there was time left to start another play. The ends turned back toward their goal, waving at their scattered teammates that the hard-fought contest was now practically history.

A piercing shriek from some five thousand throats called the attention of the all too-confident ends back

to the place where the ball had been. There was no ball there now. But there was a dark streak, accompanied by two other streaks, which were making for the Reedland goal with all the speed they could command. The ends started after the Milford players, then stopped—laughing. What did those numskulls think they were pulling off? Didn't they know that the ball was dead . . . and out of play?

On the sidelines the Reedland coach tore his hair and tried to make himself heard above the riotous sound.

The usually quiet and unemotional Coach Dolan tossed his hat into the air and jumped up and down like a schoolboy. Arrick and Conway and the other Milford substitutes jumped with him. So did the Milford rooters.

"Fight 'em, Big Three, fight 'em!" they yelled as they saw Stuffy, Pepper and Brick running together . . . with Stuffy and Brick prepared to ward off any Reedland players.

Many folks didn't know what it was all about, but they cheered anyway. Some of the Reedland team at least knew there must be something wrong, for they gave chase to the Milford man with the ball. But every one of the eleven Milford players had somehow managed to form in front of the flying

Pepper, and to serve as his interference. Beef Mellon took great pleasure in dumping two Reedland tacklers out of Pepper's way. Brick fell headlong in front of another, just as it seemed that Pepper must be stopped. Stuffy stuck by Pepper all the way to Reedland's goal line, staving off one last effort to tackle him as he went over for a touchdown.

Immediately, while a tremendous thundering of noise was taking place, the Reedland team crowded about the referee to enter protest.

"Touchdown's allowed," said the referee. "The ball was still in play. Milford did not signal for a fair catch and the ball was not dead unless touched by a Reedland man. Milford was perfectly within her rights in grabbing up the ball and running with it."

The try for point after touchdown failed, but Milford was so deliriously happy that no one cared when Stuffy's place kick went wild. As the whistle screeched for the end of the game, Stuffy, Pepper and Brick were pounced upon and lifted to the shoulders of their teammates . . . Brick being accorded special attention.

The mighty Reedland team, crestfallen and dazed, its members not yet able to comprehend that they had actually been defeated, 6 to 3, gathered in a

little knot on the field. But first, Reedland—true sportsmen that they were, gave Milford a hearty cheer as the gamest bunch of fellows they had ever encountered.

As the members of the Big Three were borne to the sidelines, Brick called across to Pepper.

"Well, Pep, did I make up for missing that pass?"

"You sure did!" answered Pepper, happily, and from the look in his eyes Brick knew the feud was over.

"I said once and I say again, so that all can hear," exclaimed the overjoyed Coach Dolan, "that fellow Brick uses his head!"

Then the mist which had hung over the town of Reedland since the rain had ceased that morning, turned again into drops of extremely wet moisture . . . but a cloudburst could not have dampened the soaring spirits of the Milfordites. While the Reedland crowd broke for cover, the fifteen-hundred-odd Milford fans swarmed about the dressing-room, waiting for their gridiron heroes to come forth.

Inside the dressing-room, mud-coated youths danced wearily but happily under showers. As they were crawling into street clothes, the janitor of the

building came in with a white calling card, asking after the whereabouts of Stuffy Owen.

"Here!" answered Stuffy.

He took the card, read something which was written in pen and ink on the back, then turned to his teammates.

"Here, bunch! Get this!" he called.

"Elmer Sanderson invites the Milford Team to a Chicken Dinner at Whatever Date and Time the Team shall Specify, in Honor of Their Great Victory and in Appreciation of the Most Thrilling Afternoon He Ever Had."

A hum of surprise went about the room.

"Shall we accept the invitation, gang?"

"Shall we? Some one crown that guy!"

"Well—say when!"

"One hour from now suits me."

"Aw, tell him we'll let him know later. We got to have plenty of time to eat chicken!"

"Just as you say," obliged Stuffy, winking at Brick and scribbling "We accept. Arrange date later," on the card, handing it back to the janitor so that he could return it to the sender.

Half an hour later, the Milfordites, waiting to greet their team, broke into a wilder yell—if that

was possible—than they had been guilty of during the hair-raising game. The yell was occasioned by the sight of Stuffy, Pepper and Brick leaving the dressing-room together. And Reedland citizens, hearing the yell, wondered if those rabid Milford fans would never get through cheering.

CHAPTER XII

A NEW KIND OF LOYALTY

SOME one, some time, somewhere, made the remark that "Experience is the greatest teacher" and the world has been repeating this worm-eaten chestnut ever since. Stuffy, Pepper and Brick repeated it themselves after the *hatchet had been buried* (another chestnut!) and each resolved never again to permit anything to come up which would mar their friendship for one another. This very attitude perhaps explains the nature of the conversation which might have been heard, some months later, had one been within earshot of the three chums.

"Honest, Stuffy, would you cut your right arm off for me?"

It was Pepper Lawton talking and there was a twinkle in his eye. The chum addressed took another bite of a puffy white doughnut and looked off into space as though considering before making answer.

"Well, now—if it came right down to it I might cut part of it off," he replied.

"Part of it!" laughed Pepper.

"You're not much of a musketeer," taunted Brick Mitchell, sliding down from the light lunch counter. "You wouldn't even part with half a doughnut for either of us . . . let alone your arm!"

"Is th-that s-so!" protested Stuffy Owen, so violently that half the doughnut jumped out of his mouth and fell to the floor. Stuffy looked at it a moment, disappointed; then his face brightened and he pointed at the fallen half vindictively.

"There—that proves it!"

"Go on! Just as if you did it on purpose!" joshed Pepper and Brick together.

Stuffy turned upon his chums, with a wounded expression.

"Huh! That's all the thanks I get when I do give up something for you guys. Gee, I wish I had that half a doughnut back!"

Two pair of hands, applied firmly to Stuffy's collar and the seat of his pants, helped him leave Mike's Light Lunch Counter and arrive suddenly in the sunlight of a warm spring day. Stuffy, sitting in the grassy plot between the sidewalk and the curb, glowered up at his ejectors.

"I'll get you fellows for this if I have to grow a beard!"

Brick extended a hand to assist Stuffy to his feet.

"Get up and get a little of that baseball air in your system!" he commanded. "A few more days like this and we'll be able to start practice."

Stuffy pulled himself to his feet painfully.

"And to think that I tossed away a perfectly good piece of doughnut on . . ."

"Oh, for the love of blue catfish!" broke in Pepper, grabbing Stuffy by the arm. "Can't you get your one-track mind off eats five seconds? The baseball season's almost here, man. Wake up! Come to! Explode! Show a little life!"

Stuffy raised his arms above his head.

"I wish you birds wouldn't annoy me," he said, in an irritated tone. "There's plenty of time to get excited when the season arrives. As for me, well—if I never saw a baseball again it would be soon enough."

Stuffy might have been annihilated right then and there had not Pepper and Brick observed Hoops Miller approaching. Hoops was a senior in Milford High this year and veteran pitcher of the baseball team for the past two seasons.

"Hello! How's the Big Three?" asked Miller,

pleasantly. "All raring to try out for the team, I suppose?"

"You bet!" spoke up Brick, then, quickly. "That is—all but Stuffy here—he's pulling the same old line . . . does it every year . . . says he doesn't care if he never sees a baseball again."

Miller laughed, reaching a hand inside his pocket. "Maybe this'll call his bluff."

The veteran pitcher drew out a brand-new baseball, its white surface shining in the sunlight. Three wild-eyed youths jumped for it, but Stuffy got there first.

"Wow! Here you go, Pepper—a double play!"

Stuffy whipped the ball to Pepper, who made a short toss to Brick, while Miller stood by, smiling.

"Side out!" he called, imitating an umpire. Then, to Pepper and Brick, "I guess your friend's not so bad off as he'd like to make out."

"Completely recovered!" announced Stuffy, with his first show of real spirit. "Boy! isn't spring wonderful? With its busting buds and its April showers and its ball diamonds and its . . ."

"Now he's getting poetic!" sniffed Pepper. "He just can't be natural."

"Perhaps I'd better take the ball away from him,"

suggested Miller; "I've got to be getting along any way."

Stuffy returned the ball reluctantly to its owner.

"What chance do you think we three have got of making the team?" he asked.

Hoops slipped the ball out of sight and stood regarding the trio for a moment.

"If you fellows weren't all Freshmen I'd say you stood an excellent chance," he said, finally. "Last year's team is pretty well shot." His voice lowered and he spoke with a tense eagerness. "I sure hope we can beat Reedland this year! It'll be my last crack at them. I've pitched against them twice and lost out each time. . . . Last year I thought we had 'em whipped. You remember—it was four to three, our favor, until the ninth. Then our infield blew up and two errors and a scratch hit sent in two runs. Good-by game—five to four!"

"And the infield's where we shine!" put in Pepper, his enthusiasm getting the better of him.

"That remains to be seen," said Hoops. "That's one thing you fellows want to guard against—over confidence. It's usually the way with those that haven't been thoroughly tested under fire."

"Under fire?" broke out Stuffy, with a sense of righteous indignation. "Why, we've played together

since the sixth grade and didn't our Eighth Grade team take the county championship last season? What would you call that but under fire? Besides, our football . . ."

"Don't misunderstand me," warned Hoops. "Of course, your playing together in the past is going to help, but don't let it get to your heads. And when I slip you the information that Coach Dolan is tickled pink you fellows are eligible to play this season—hold onto your hatbands. You've made good on the football field . . . but the diamond is something different again. . . ."

Hoops hesitated, conscious that his three listeners were hanging upon every word. The veteran pitcher was the idol of the school. He was admired and respected by all because of his extreme modesty and his wonderful knack of treating every one as though they were his closest friends. He leaned forward and addressed the three Freshmen earnestly.

"Now, fellows, you don't have to take this, but I'm speaking from experience. When I first got into high school I was sure that I was a great pitcher. I told everybody how good I was and I let Coach Dolan know that I thought Milford High was indeed fortunate to have me enrolled. Well—the first year out I never even made the team! I was so

good that I was rotten. Get the idea? Nobody could teach me anything. I knew all there was to know about pitching. When a fellow that I was certain I could pitch rings around got on the team I was furious. I thought the coach was playing favorites. Well, that fellow graduated and I made the team in my Sophomore year but still I didn't realize anything was wrong with me. It took the big game with Reedland to drive it home. I tried to strike out their best hitter in a pinch . . . on straight, fast balls. I was confident he couldn't hit my speed when I actually let loose. Well, he did. A two-bagger and the game was over.

"Coach Dolan hadn't said a thing to me till then. I guess he knew it wouldn't have done much good. 'We beat Reedland last year without a real pitcher,' he said to me, 'but the fellow who pitched knew he didn't amount to much and he took especial pains to make the little that he did amount to—count for something.' Well, that's all the Coach ever had to say to me.

"Last year I lost again . . . but I don't think it was entirely my fault. We had some other fellows on the team who felt the same way I had the year before. Perhaps you fellows won't need to take any of this to heart, but I'm passing it on for what

it's worth. I want to see you make good. Milford needs you . . . and I'd like to end my high school days with a win over Reedland. . . . S'long!"

Without giving a chance for any reply or comment, Hoops Miller swung upon his heel and strode off, his going making what he had said all the more impressive. The three chums gazed after the retreating figure of Milford's baseball idol . . . and then looked soberly at one another.

"Wasn't that a sweet little lecture?" piped Stuffy, kicking a toe against the curb thoughtfully.

"It sure was," assented Brick. "And Hoops is right. We were getting too chesty . . . it was mighty white of him to . . . to put us wise. . . ."

"Yes—he didn't have to do it. He's just . . . well—he's just a Milford fellow," said Pepper.

"And that's what we've got to start out being . . . Milford fellows," resolved Stuffy. "I see it now. We've been too much for ourselves. From here on it's each for all and all for Milford High! What say?"

For answer, three right hands met in a clasp of agreement.

"I wonder if all Freshies are as fresh as we are?" asked Pepper, almost hopelessly.

"There you go—bragging about us again!" sniffed Stuffy. "Won't you ever learn?"

Forty-one candidates for Milford High's baseball team put in appearance at Brinkley field the opening night of practice. It excelled by seven eager aspirants any number reporting in previous years and Coach Dolan was elated. Milford was one of the smaller high schools of the State but had always been one of the athletic leaders. Milford made up for what it lacked in size by a rousing spirit. Big city teams, invading Milford to participate in what they regarded as good practice games, had been rudely shocked on more than one occasion through encountering a spirited opposition . . . opposition that did not recognize defeat . . . opposition that thrived on upsetting dope . . . opposition born of the necessity for inspired play to claim the outside chance of victory. Because of this fighting spirit in the face of what had been regarded as overwhelming odds, Milford had come to be looked upon as the athletic enigma of high school circles. Rival teams abandoned the usual policy of considering Milford's past record as a means of determining relative strength. Sport writers had a habit of saying, "Milford always has a chance." And Coach Dolan was looked upon as the wizard of high school coaches.

Tempting offers from larger schools had failed to shake his loyalty for Milford and had only served to increase Milford's love for him. Coach Dolan was along in years now, but if ever too old to continue as athletic instructor the town of Milford would elect him mayor or something just to keep him in the community.

This season the coach had his work cut out for him. Of last year's team only four men remained. There was Ted Rath, centerfielder; Don Watkins, second baseman; Morris Fitzgerald, third baseman, and, of course, Hoops Miller, pitcher. Around this veteran material, as a nucleus, Coach Dolan must virtually construct a new nine.

But the task was made lighter by the presence of promising candidates. In fact, there was speculation among Milford High students as to whether all of the four veterans would be able to hold their places on the team. This speculation centered largely upon Don Watkins, pivot man of last year's infield. He had played a corking game around second base, but the old combination at shortstop and first had been broken up through graduation.

And now Don must compete against a ready-made combination of Freshmen—Owen and Lawton and Mitchell—better known as Stuffy, Pepper and Brick.

These three fellows had done everything together since folks could recall their being old enough to toddle. Their long association had given them a sort of peculiar perfection, a collective rather than an individual perfection. "What can't those three fellows do?" or "What won't they be up to next?" were common expressions elicited by their activities. Stuffy, apparently the slowest of the three, was capable of a surprising speed . . . lightning-like moves when the situation demanded. His lazy manner was extremely deceptive but characteristic of him in everything that he did. Pepper, working with Stuffy, was the smallest of the three—fast on his feet and with the ability to whip a ball accurately both overhand and underhand. He and Stuffy guarded second base and shortstop territory with machine-like effectiveness because they had grown to understand the finest points about each other's playing. And Brick—tall, angular Brick—at first! Big hands that reached out into the nowhere and grabbed wild throws; an arm that shot the ball on a line across the diamond; the surest catcher of the three. It was seldom that three fellows had come up from the grades such close comrades; so capable of fitting in as a unit with every kind of robust activity.

When, after the first week's practice, Coach Dolan

selected the first trial nine, Milford fans nodded their heads wisely. The Freshmen trio were on the infield in their respective positions with the veteran Fitzgerald at third. Hard luck for Watkins. Perhaps the coach would develop him for some other position . . . the outfield . . . or carry him as an infield substitute. Began to look like Milford was due for a great season. Lots of spirit in the workouts; the forty-one candidates sticking to a man even though quite a few knew there was no hope for them making the team; every one giving all they had for the sake of Milford High. Optimism was increased by reports that Hoops Miller had never shown such pitching form. He was in great early season shape and all that remained was to put a reasonably good team behind him. He would do the rest.

Brinkley field, scene of all outdoor athletic contests in Milford, was situated at the edge of town, a mile and a quarter from the school. It was part of Coach Dolan's training for the players to require that they dress in the high school locker room and jog all the way to the grounds. When practice sessions were over, every fellow must jog back. This ruling had been in effect many years so that the town was used to the spectacle of straggling figures loping

along the road, either singly—in pairs—or in little running groups. Motorists in passing by, had ceased offering the boys rides to and from Brinkley field, knowing full well that such an invitation would be loyally refused. Woe unto him who should travel by any other means than his legs and at any less speed than a trotting gait!

It was a week before the first game of the season with Bloomsburg that Stuffy, Pepper and Brick found themselves jogging toward Brinkley field alongside Don Watkins. The veteran second baseman had caught up to them with a lengthened stride as if he had desired to place himself in their company. But on joining the three he had remained strangely silent save to answer whatever was directed at him. The Freshmen shot wondering glances at their infield rival. What could he want with them?

"Looks like you fellows are all going to make the team," the veteran blurted out, finally.

"Th-that so?" panted Stuffy guardedly.

Pepper and Brick offered no comment. If Watkins was seeking to find out how they felt about their chances, he would get little satisfaction. The air seemed suddenly charged. The veteran, so far as any of the three knew, was only competing against

Pepper, but all three stood as one against this competition. Pepper must win out over Watkins for the second base position; he *was* winning out . . . and Stuffy and Brick had been helping him to win out! Sizing up the opposition for their respective infield places, Stuffy and Brick had early seen that the big fight would be up to Pepper. Accordingly—in work-outs—Stuffy and Brick had exerted every effort to bring out Pepper's playing qualities by giving him gilt-edged support; by playing to him and for him. Each for all and all for . . . ?

"You've got a mighty neat little infield combination," Watkins congratulated. "And I—well, if there's any way I could be of any help to you . . . my past experience . . . I thought perhaps . . ."

The proposition was embarrassing to the veteran —and embarrassing to the Freshmen. It was that old loyal, self-sacrificing Milford spirit cropping out again . . . or *was* it . . . ? A vague uncertainty as to just what it was kept the three chums from opening up—and made it hard for Watkins to finish what he had been bent upon proposing. For some reason this veteran player was striving to put himself within their good graces, was making crafty advances, seeking to invade their inner circle as it were. A slow resentment began to burn.

"Why—the lineup—no one knows," stammered Pepper, a bit self-consciously. "It's too early to figure on who's going to be . . . to be picked for the team."

Watkins grinned broadly at Pepper's obvious attempt to be disconcerting . . . and to save his feelings.

"I think some positions have been pretty generally decided," he replied, pointedly. "And I don't want you to think that I have any hard feelings about your beating me out, because I haven't. I know what it means to play on an infield that works together . . . and you each understand each other's style of play. That's why you stand a chance of developing a great combination—like the one I played on last year . . . but . . ."

"Yes, Hoops was telling us all about it," broke in Stuffy, impatient to change the subject.

"Oh, he was?" returned Watkins, quietly.

They were nearing Brinkley field and the Freshmen breathed easier. Looked like the veteran second-sacker was getting ready to lecture them. They could take lectures from Miller because he was team captain . . . and also he was Miller. But Watkins. Why, if they remembered correctly, he was the one that lost last year's big game with Reed.

land . . . the game that Miller had wanted most to win. And here Watkins was, giving as his opinion that they might develop into a great infield combination like the one he had played on. It was to laugh! There was a sliver in the woodpile somewhere.

"And what was it that Hoops told you?" the veteran persisted.

"About how your great infield combination lost the Reedland game for him," shot back Stuffy.

Watkins colored; his jaw tightened and he swung off the road to the cinder path leading directly in to Brinkley field through the pedestrian entrance.

"I wouldn't have said that," reproved Pepper, in a low tone. "You may have started trouble."

"Serves him right!" snapped Stuffy, heatedly. "We'll take our pointers from the Coach. You'd think everybody that ever played on a Milford High team was qualified to tell you just what to do and what not to do. I'm getting sick of it."

"Me, too," assented Brick, voicing his feelings for the first time. "We've been soft-soaped enough!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE STRUGGLE FOR SECOND BASE

THERE was an atmosphere of exceptional vim and go on Brinkley field that night. Coach Dolan was beginning to apply the clamps in his training. He had done with preliminary coaching, advising and pleading. The roving eye of the Coach took in every play. Every player was on his toes, and most of them were over-anxious.

"The next man that makes an error comes out!" bawled the Coach, with his first team selections taking fielding practice. "I don't care if I have to replace the whole team. You're playing like a bunch of Punch and Judy dummies!"

The second team men had been hitting and running bases to give the regulars something to work on. Coach Dolan's outburst had come after a succession of errors, the last one being a messing up of an easy roller down the third base line by the veteran Fitzgerald.

"There's one down and a man on first," called the

Coach. "Now see if you can figure out what to do with the ball if it comes to you!"

Don Watkins stepped to bat, smiling at the discomfiture of the first team players under the lash of Coach Dolan's tongue. Hal Bond, the nearest thing to a pitcher outside of Hoops Miller, was in the box. Bond didn't take himself too seriously. He could get the ball over the plate pretty regularly, but was as much surprised as any one if there was ever "anything on it." His instructions had been to "lob 'em up." Coach Dolan wanted every batter to hit and to run every hit out as though his life depended on it. The player who had reached first on Fitzgerald's error, took a good lead off the bag.

"Let's see a double play!" entreated a student spectator.

Bond wound up, his eyes on the base-runner. As he let the pitch go, the runner dug for second. It was a hit-and-run play. The ball was a bit wide and waist high, but Watkins strode forward and swung. He had particularly wanted the ball to go to a certain place on the diamond and he grinned when he saw it leave his bat on a low, skimming line—straight at Pepper! Watkins tore for first.

The ball crossed in front of the base-runner on his dash for second and struck the diamond where

the grass begins, taking a sharp bound. Pepper, playing deep, lurched forward to meet it—keeping tab on the player racing for second with Stuffy all ready on the base waiting for the ball.

"All yours!" Pepper heard Stuffy call. He reached out his hands eagerly . . . too eagerly. The ball smacked against his glove; he got his throwing hand on it, but fumbled. In a desperate effort to recover, Pepper's foot collided with the horsehide and kicked it a few feet away. The base-runner slid into second. A double-play chance gone; still time to get the fleet Watkins by a hair at first. Pepper pounced upon the ball and snapped it with all the speed he could command, in an underhand throw at Brick. The lanky first baseman left his feet in a frantic leap; the ball just ticked the top of his glove, rolling clear to the dugout. Elated, the base-runner at second scampered down to third while Watkins pulled up smilingly at the middle corner.

"I don't know as last year's infield combination was so bad," he said, in tones just loud enough for Stuffy and the much chagrined Pepper to hear.

"It took a bad bound," said Stuffy, loyally.

"Bad bound, nothing!" scoffed Watkins. "Right in his hands!"

Pepper's face flushed, but he held his tongue. The first night of the Coach's verbal massage had flustered him. He had been too anxious to make a good showing. Another time and he would . . .

"Watkins, change places with Lawton!" ordered Coach Dolan from the third-base coaching line. "You're rotten!" he encouraged. "The whole team's rotten!"

To unseasoned material, Coach Dolan often sounded hard-boiled and rough. But, as association with him continued, boys came to find that it was just his way. There was not a warmer, kinder-hearted man in all Milford than the coach. Convinced that a boy had athletic ability and was willing to learn, the coach would spend hours with him—patiently trying to bring out this ability. Many college stars attributed their prowess to the training given them during high school days under Coach Dolan. He had a faculty for infusing pep, for getting the boys excited over very common incidents; for arousing a spirit of competition. And he was doing this now.

"Do you think you can run bases?" he shot at Pepper.

"Yes, sir," answered Pepper, meekly, as he surrendered his second base position to Watkins.

"I doubt it," returned the coach. "But we'll see. Get in there, Watkins, and show those rookies how it's done!"

The veteran second-sacker slipped on his glove, which had been flung out to him, and took a brief run about the bag. Pepper led off second base, step by step, not wanting to take chances on getting caught. Watkins hailed Bond. The pitcher stalked out of the box.

"Do me a favor," requested Watkins, in Bond's ear. "I want this next batter to hit to me. Pitch the ball on the outside so that he'll have to reach for it and pull it over, will you?"

"Sure thing!" obliged Bond.

"Cut out that inside stuff and play ball!" shouted a Milford High onlooker.

"All right, you assorted collection of baseball clowns. There's men on second and third and only one down!" advised the Coach. "What you going to do about it?"

The batter, an outfield candidate by the name of Bates, stood fingering his club nervously. He had a chance to win favor with the coach if he could score the two runners with a hit . . . any kind of a hit.

This time with runners perching so close to home, Bond did not wind up. He lifted his arm, held it

poised for a moment, then brought it down in a sweeping flash. His aim was perfect; the ball cut the outside corner. Bates struck at it with a blind fury and, more from good fortune than science, met the ball squarely on the nose. The drive looked like it was going to be good for two bases when it left the bat. Both runners set in motion. Watkins, seeing that the ball was ticketed for the outfield, turned his back and ran into the short right garden. He looked around and flung up his gloved hand.

If Watkins had made the catch it would have been almost miraculous. As it was he knocked the drive down. Quickly recovering the ball, the veteran saw there was not a likelihood of getting the runner at home plate. But the runner, making for third, was still some ten feet from the bag.

Pepper could tell by Fitzgerald's eyes, as he neared third base, that the play was going to be close. He hit the dirt in a long, jarring slide. There was a cracking report as the ball shot into Fitzgerald's glove. He shoved the ball out to meet a pair of skidding feet. A wild round of applause went up from the scattered spectators. Watkins' marvelous stop and throw had cut the runner down at third!

"That's a little more like it," approved the Coach, grudgingly.

Pepper picked himself up, crestfallen, brushing off the ground-in dirt.

"Sorry!" apologized Fitzgerald. "I had to get you!"

Pepper gave the veteran third-baseman a quick, appreciative look. "Why, that's all right," he said. "It's all in the game."

The rest of the practice session was highly unsatisfactory so far as the Freshmen trio was concerned. The opportunity granted Watkins was seized upon by that individual with an enthusiasm that produced one sparkling infield play after another. He accepted seven chances without the faintest sign of an error and saved both Stuffy and Brick from at least two wild throws apiece by sensational one-hand catches of their poor pegs to second. All in all it proved to be a rather big afternoon for the veteran . . . so much so that it was immediately noised about, with Watkins rated as very likely to supplant Lawton at second, thus breaking up the much-heralded Freshman combination.

Stuffy, Pepper and Brick left the dressing room together after the practice. They walked toward their homes slowly, silently. Stuffy was the first to

speak. He caught his chums by the arm and turned them about to face him.

"I've figured it all out!" he said hotly. "The whole thing's a put up job. Coach Dolan's intended to use Watkins all along, but he knew he's had experience and he hasn't been in a hurry to work him in!"

"Oh, I don't think so," objected Pepper, thoughtfully. "He gives every one a fair chance. I should have been taken out to-day. I don't know what was the matter . . . I . . ."

"Go on! He'd have taken you out anyway," insisted Stuffy. "That just gave him an extra good excuse. Remember how Watkins talked to us on the way out to the park to-day? He was just kidding us. He knew he was sure of his position and he just wanted to see what we'd say!"

"Sounds pretty reasonable," agreed Brick, regretfully.

"But you don't know for sure," argued Pepper. "Anyhow, I guess it was too much for us to expect —all three of us making the team the first year. You fellows go ahead. Don't mind me. I'll keep on trying the best I can."

"You're twice as good as Watkins!" protested Stuffy.

Pepper shoved his chum good-naturedly. "Have you forgotten what we shook hands about, old swelled hat band?" he asked. "Let's forget ourselves for a while."

The last week of practice, before the first game, ran itself out quickly. Each workout was stiffer than the one preceding it and all on the squad, now cut in half, felt the pressure of the training. "I'm going to get a baseball team out of this bunch if I have to make every player cut his wisdom teeth," Coach Dolan told the school reporter one night, which declaration perhaps accounted for the following heading in the *Milford High Screech Owl:* "Toothsome Array of Baseball Talent to Be Extracted From Squad."

The real news of interest, however, was the alternating of Don Watkins with Pepper Lawton at second. Apparently the coach had decided upon a man for every other position but this one. The rivalry had been intense all week and no one would know until the line-up was posted on Friday afternoon before the game, who had been chosen.

CHAPTER XIV

STUFFY BETS A DOUGHNUT

AN interested throng of students gathered about the bulletin board at recess time between classes, when the first line-up of Milford High's baseball team was to be posted. In the crowd were most of the team candidates, quite naturally—and there was much good-natured joshing.

"Not a chance for you!" guyed Slim Mooney, referring to Dub Eldred whom he spotted in the crowd. "You couldn't make the team if they put you on it!"

Dub looked at his "guyer" with the air of one who is deeply offended.

"And why should I?" he asked. "I believe in every one being employed. If I made the team there would be nothing for the other eight men to do!"

"There, Slim—guess that will hold you!" kidded a listener.

"You mean, there'd be nothing that the other eight men *could* do!" came back the school wit, determined to have the last say. All wits insist upon having the last say. Ever notice it?

An excited shoving forward in the crowd indicated that some one had glimpsed the secretary with the all-important baseball sheet.

"Here's Miss Frillmood now!"

"Please hurry, Miss Frillmood!"

"Let's get a look at it!"

Miss Frillmood was known by every student in Milford High. She had served in the office for the past twenty years, and she hadn't changed an eye-winker in all that time. She always wore a white shirtwaist and a dark skirt and paper-rolled cuffs up to her elbows. She knew as little about sports as an Eskimo does of one hundred degrees in the shade. And what's more, she didn't want to know about sports. The only reason she posted the line-up was because she was in charge of the bulletin board . . . and she had to. The duty was a painful one, to be sure, as she risked being pushed and jammed, and she didn't see why any student should get excited over a sheet of paper with a few names on it.

"Would you be so good as to stand back and make room for me to get to that board?" she asked,

pertly, holding the paper as if afraid that some one would try to snatch it from her.

"By all means," assured Slim, with mock gravity and great politeness. "Stand aside, multitude, and let Miss Frillmood pass!"

The line opened at this, but quickly closed behind the advancing figure of the secretary.

"Don't push!" she commanded, "or I won't put this notice up at all."

"Aw, now, Miss Frillmood! Have a heart!"

"You know you wouldn't do a thing like that!"

Miss Frillmood restrained a smile with difficulty. She did like to be made a great deal of, and she knew that she held the upper hand until the announcement of the line-up was posted. She took her time about unlocking the glass paneled frame to the bulletin board, amid pleas for more speed.

"Two minutes after I get this notice up you all won't care two whoops about seeing it," she said as she took down the thumbscrews and shoved the sheet in place. "You're a funny bunch. It's a sign of insanity when . . ."

"Yea! Dub didn't make the team!" shouted Slim, who had managed to keep at Miss Frillmood's elbow.

"Let me see!"

"Who's up for second base?"

"Move your head, won't you?"

The scramble was on. Slim, holding back against the crowd, pushed Miss Frillmood to the side.

"This way out, Ma'am!" he directed. "Much obliged!"

Miss Frillmood did escape and that was all. She stood for a moment outside the office door watching the craned necks and shuffling feet.

"They're crazy!" she reiterated, "the whole bunch of them! I never saw a boy or girl that wasn't." Then her businesslike face softened and a twinkle came into her eyes. "But I guess it's good for 'em!" she told herself as she went inside.

On the outer edge of the throng, quite willing to wait until those nearer the board should bring tidings of the line-up, stood Pepper Lawton. In temperament Pepper had always been quiet, and he had won his nickname through being so thoroughly opposite to peppery. He seldom said much, unless greatly aroused, and then what he said was usually a plenty. But Pepper was fast—mentally and physically fast. His movements were quick, with little lost motion. Unlike Stuffy, he did not need to be goaded into action to show dash. He was always

ready to take part in anything on an instant's notice, providing it met with his approval. But making a football rush out of trying to be the first one to find out who had been selected for the team did not appeal to Pepper. The news would be relayed soon enough . . . perhaps too soon . . . for him!

"Line-up and batting order," read Slim; "listen to this, bunch! Ted Rath, centerfield; Stuffy Owen, shortstop. . . . Hurray for the Freshies! . . . Don Watkins, second base. Ah, Don gets it!"

A murmur went through those present but the murmur was not now of surprise. The last week had brought a growing conviction that such would be the choice.

"Go on!" called a voice. "Let's hear the rest!"

"All right," continued Slim, "Brick Mitchell, first base. Another Freshie! Say—this can't be the varsity. Must be the Freshman team got posted by mistake. Some one page Miss Frillmood! . . . Morris Fitzgerald, third base. How could we do without him? His third year—at third! Tom Kendrick, left field; Jim Hemming, right field; Merle Conway, catch, and who do you suppose, pitch? Nobody but our own invincible Hoopity Hoops Miller! That—ladies and gentlemen—is

the line-up for the game with Bloomsburg. Station S—L—I—M broadcasting on a wave length of three gas meters. . . ."

The school wit was appropriately mobbed at this juncture.

The elation that Stuffy and Brick would ordinarily have felt at their making the Milford High Baseball Team their first time out, was greatly dulled by the failure of their chum. It would be the first break in their athletic association. They had always gone in for sports together and had played together. This severance of such relations came as a severe blow. But Pepper kept his disappointment well concealed. He sought out Watkins as the crowd started to break up.

"I'm wishing you all sorts of luck, Watty," he said, holding out his hand.

The veteran gave Pepper a surprised and searching look.

"Why . . . why, thanks," he said, taking the proffered hand, "I—really, I hope you'll believe me: I was sure it would be you, not I."

Pepper's answer was honest and came like a flash. "I don't see what cause you could have had to believe that. You've played better ball than I and that's all that's necessary."

"I grant you that I may still be a better individual player," admitted Watkins, in a low voice which he tried to keep out of hearing of the students who crowded around curiously—especially out of hearing of Stuffy and Brick who came pushing in at that moment. When they saw to whom Pepper was talking they stopped, a bit uncertain. Pepper's obviously friendly attitude toward his rival rather disarmed his two chums who, if they could have had their way, would have been more distant.

". . . but, in my opinion, you're the mainstay of your infield combination," finished Watkins, frankly. "Which means that I've got my work cut out for me," he added, with a significant nod over his shoulder.

Pepper did not exactly understand what Watkins meant by such an inference. He was given no time to ponder over it, as friends laid compelling hands on the veteran second-sacker and drew him away, leaving Pepper to his chums and a few sympathizing Freshies who had counted on the Big Three landing together.

"A dirty shame!" declared Phil Larkin, Freshman president. "Just because Watkins was a veteran, Coach . . ."

"No, now don't start that kind of talk around," interrupted Pepper. "Watkins isn't only a veteran, which is greatly in his favor, but he's a better player. I've been studying his play this week and there's no use of my kidding myself or letting you fellows kid me just because you're my friends. That won't help matters any. Of course it hurts to lose out; I've wanted to go on with Stuffy and Brick. But there's next year, you know . . . and the year after that! There's even this year. I'm going to keep on Watkins' heels as long as he's on that line-up!"

This expression from Pepper was not sufficient to console Stuffy. Brick, too, was rather sullenly unmoved. The bond of loyalty among the three was pulling taut. They had come to the first enforced parting of the ways and the ones to win recognition were hurt more than the one who had failed.

"Cheer up, pals!" ordered Pepper, giving each a slap on the back. "I'm not dead yet. I'm just really getting alive. Say, did Coach Dolan post a list of first-team substitutes under the regular line-up?"

"No," informed Brick, gloomily, "I looked."

"Well, then," said Pepper, putting on a show of optimism, "I wouldn't call that so bad. What'll you bet he has me down for utility infielder?"

Stuffy looked at Pepper sharply to see if his chum was joking or serious. The ray of hope did help toward lightening one's spirits.

"I'll bet you a doughnut he hasn't!" said Stuffy. "But I hope you win."

CHAPTER XV

THE SECRET CONSPIRACY

EVEN though Friday was the day before the game, Coach Dolan put his charges through one of their hardest workouts. This was evidence that the coach was not at all satisfied with the showing that the first string men were making. He gave Pepper a brief chance to take infield practice, but though Pepper gave a good account of himself he was soon replaced by Watkins. It was dusk when the coach called it a day.

As Pepper started to leave the bench on his jog back to the locker room, Coach Dolan addressed him.

"Oh, Lawton," he said, in a rather off-handed way, "report in uniform at the park to-morrow."

"Yes, sir," answered Pepper, stopping short—his heart racing.

"That's all!" snapped the coach.

Four other aspirants for the team were as sum-

marily told to show up at the field at game time, which meant that they were to warm the bench at least—as substitutes. And each one of these men was as happy as though his name had been posted on the bulletin board.

"I win the doughnut," Pepper informed Stuffy as they trotted back to the dressing-room.

"That may be, but I'll bet you another doughnut you don't get a chance to play," sniffed Stuffy, unwilling to give in.

"That's right, Doctor Kill Joy. Peddle your medicine!" kidded Pepper. "Who cares if I don't get a chance to play? It's only the first game of the season, and—I'm on the bench! That's the next thing to being on the team."

"So is the water boy on the bench," grunted Stuffy. "Did you ever see him on the team?"

It was about as sensible to argue with Stuffy when he had one of these streaks as trying to tell a barber pole that it wasn't striped. Pepper knew that Stuffy was secretly elated, so he didn't bother about what he said.

"You're at least in position, so if anything would happen to Watkins . . . if he'd go stale or something," suggested Brick, "the coach would put you in."

"Watkins is not the kind of player to go stale," opined Pepper. "He's had too much experience."

"You can't ever tell," said Stuffy, wisely. Then winking at the lanky first baseman. "Eh, Brick?"

"A man can't help dropping a ball now and then," was all that Brick would say.

Bloomsburg opened Milford's athletic season in every sport and never had any more hopes of winning than woodpeckers have of pecking holes in concrete telephone poles. Bloomsburg willingly served as fodder for the Milford teams in process of development. And the only glory that Bloomsburg ever got out of the ordeal was in making the fodder hard for Milford to swallow. On several occasions this little school had come close to ruining Milford's digestive apparatus and causing a genuine upset. But no fears were held out this year. Bloomsburg was just normal, which meant that it was due to look sick against Milford.

At the end of the fifth inning, Milford was enjoying a seven run lead, while Bloomsburg was nursing a goose egg. Hoops Miller, Milford pitcher, had let the visitors down with two measly hits, his twirling being of such an order that the team behind him was getting very little out of the game in the way of fielding experience. As a consequence, Coach Dolan

took Miller out and put in Hal Bond, much to the latter's surprise.

"You can hold a seven-run lead, can't you?" Coach Dolan asked, as he sent the substitute hurler in.

"If I can't, the team can!" answered Bond, and the coach laughed. He liked the boy's spirit.

Hoops Miller slipped into his sweater and took a seat on the bench beside Pepper, to watch the rest of the game out.

"You sure stood 'em on their heads," complimented Pepper, quietly. "Great pitching!"

"Humph!" said Miller. "My arm's in fine shape, but there's no credit due me over *this* bunch. Bloomsburg is game enough but they just haven't had the training. Wait till we hit some real opposition."

"Such as what?" asked Pepper.

"Week after next will test our mettle. We play Harwell. They had one of the best nines in the state last season. Look like a crackerjack outfit this season, too. Hello . . . !"

The handful of Bloomsburg rooters, who had accompanied their team, were in an uproar. Their first man up to start the sixth inning had greeted Bond with a ringing three-base hit.

"Pretty tough on Bond," sympathized Miller. "That drive puts him in the hole for fair."

Pepper leaned forward on the bench and watched the infield crowd in, prepared to play for the plate if the opportunity presented. Ordinarily, with a seven-run lead, the play would have been to get the man at first, and let the runner on third score, but Coach Dolan had flashed the word to get the man at home if possible.

Bond, in trying not to give the batter a fair ball to strike at, pitched three straight balls. He steadied and put over two strikes, but lost the batter on a walk with the next pitch. Bloomsburg rooters went into a frenzy of excitement over the prospects. None out!"

"Good chance for a double play now," said Miller to Pepper.

The man on third started for home on Bond's next pitch while the man on first raced for second. Bloomsburg was trying the hit-and-run play. The batter managed to connect, tapping a weak bounder down to short. Stuffy was in on the play like a flash, fielding the ball cleanly. The runner from third was about to score, so Stuffy did not try to get him; there was a certain possibility of killing a man at second and first. He wheeled, took just a bit more

time than usual in getting set, and blazed the ball down to Watkins who stood with one foot on the second sack. The throw came at Watkins faster than he had anticipated. He, too, was set—set ready to relay the ball to the waiting Brick at first. But when the ball came at him at such lightning speed—much harder than was necessary for the distance and the time—Watkins was unable to hold it. The horsehide bounded out of his hands; the runner going to second was safe, and the batsman crossed first a good stride before the ball smacked into Brick's glove.

Men on second and first, one run in and no one out! The Bloomsburg team was as excited as its supporters, now. Looked like Milford was up in the air.

Pepper shifted about uneasily on his seat on the bench. He felt Miller's eyes searching him. And he wondered if Miller or any one else . . . had seen what he had seen.

But there was more to come. The next batter slashed a hit about fifteen feet inside of first base. Brick, in trying for it, made a great scooping pickup. Another double play chance. He could whip the ball to Watkins at second, then hike back to first and take the throw back from him for two outs. Wat-

kins dashed in to second and held out his hands for the ball. Again it came straight at him—but charged with swiftness. And for the second successive time, Watkins dropped it! Brick loped back to first as though he thought everything was all right and yelled for Watkins to "Shoot!" but all that Watkins could do was to recover the ball and hold it.

By this time, substitute pitcher Bond began to think that he had made too confident an assertion to Coach Dolan about the team holding a seven-run lead if he couldn't.

"What's the matter with you guys?" he asked the infield. "Can't you give me any support?"

Three men on bases and none out and one run in!

Watkins' face was white, his teeth were set grimly. He spat in his glove and pounded it with his fist.

"We're with you, Bondy old boy. Pitch to 'em!"

On the bench, Pepper sensed that his face must be flushed a deep red. He exchanged glances with Miller.

"I hope you don't think I'm back of . . . of their doings," he apologized.

"Whose doings?" asked Miller.

Pepper hesitated. Perhaps he was just self-con-

scious. Perhaps Miller didn't suspect, after all. Perhaps he hadn't noticed what Pepper had. If he hadn't there was no use of putting him wise. Pepper breathed thankfully as Miller again turned his attention to the game and did not press the question.

Bond, with Bloomsburg glaring at him from every base, and a Bloomsburg batter waving a bat wildly over home plate in the hopes of further rattling him, settled down to see what he could do toward clearing up the situation. The batter let the first ball go by and Bond grinned as the umpire called it a strike. The next would have been a ball but the batter—too eager—swung. Strike two! Bond doublecrossed the hitter by shooting the next ball over the plate for another called strike. Batter out! The Bloomsburg noise died down, and the base runners began to look like parked cars with no one to drive them home.

Bond pitched carefully to the next batter and got the count of three and two on him. The infield moved in, tensely, as the bases were full and everything was to be played home.

Crack! The ball left the bat on a sharp bounding roller to the right of second base. There was a sigh of relief from the Milford supporters as they

saw the veteran Watkins come swinging in to make the pickup. Then a groan of dismay: in some unaccountable manner the ball had escaped Watkins—bounded between his legs in fact—and gone carroming into the field! Before Jim Hemming, Milford right fielder, could recover the ball, two runners scored and a third brought up at third base while the fortunate individual who had reached first on an error, appeared just as elated as though he had made a hit.

As for Bloomsburg, well—its few representative citizens did a thorough job of representing. They made a great clamor over the rally which had netted three runs thus far, with more in prospect. It mattered not to Bloomsburg how these runs came about. A run on an error counted just as much as a run cleanly earned by hitting.

Milford rooters, on the other hand, were growing alarmed, and began to show it.

"Take him out!" came cries referring to Watkins. "Put Pepper in. Anybody could do better than that. Three errors in one inning!"

The players on the bench looked toward Coach Dolan expectantly. The coach sat, with the brim of his cap pulled well down to shade the eyes; a patch of graying hair just showing above the ears; one

hand cupping his chin, the elbow leaning on a knee which was crossed. This attitude was characteristic of Coach Dolan. He had been known to hold this pose for an entire game, scarcely moving or taking his eyes off the field, or saying a word. Sometimes a mere wave of the hand would beckon a player off the diamond and send a substitute out. It was impossible to tell how the coach felt or what he was thinking or what he was going to do.

Miller nudged Pepper.

"Watkins looked pretty bad on that last play," he said. "You may get a chance."

Pepper, greatly embarrassed, kicked at the earth underfoot.

"He—he's just had a run of hard luck," Pepper managed, not being able to meet Miller's eyes. "I guess he'll pull out of it."

To Pepper's intense relief, Coach Dolan did not take Watkins out. The veteran second baseman walked in to the pitcher's mound where Bond stood, shaking his head. Watkins appeared a bit upset. Stuffy and Brick crouched rather stiffly, waiting for play to be resumed. Fitzgerald sauntered over toward the box to reassure his team-mate of other days.

"Never mind that, Watty, old man," said Fitz-

gerald. "We all let 'em get by once in a while. Buck up!"

Watkins shot a quick glance at Stuffy; then Brick. There was no word of sympathy or encouragement from them. The Freshman infielders looked on silently.

"Play ball!" insisted the umpire.

The players trotted back to their places.

One out, three runs in, and men on third and first! The Bloomsburg batter hit the first ball pitched, straight through pitcher's box. Bond made a frantic grab for it, the ball deflecting off his glove in the direction of Watkins. This time the veteran second sacker, driven almost to desperation, made a startling pickup when it appeared that the drive was sure to reach the outfield. He turned, with a quick underhand toss to Stuffy who had covered second; and Stuffy shot the ball on a line to Brick. The man on third scored during the putouts, but Watkins had partially redeemed himself. His fielding of the hard-hit drive had started a dazzling double play which retired the side. Score, Milford, 7; Bloomsburg, 4.

With the uncertain sixth out of the way, Bloomsburg's threat vanished while Milford kept up its pounding of Bloomsburg moundsmen—three in

number—who tried in vain to stem the heavy hitting. And foremost among Milford hitters, after the ragged play of the season's first game was over, stood the name of Don Watkins. In five times at bat the veteran had hit safely four times, with a single, two doubles and a home run to his credit. What were a couple of errors compared to such clouting? Watkins alone was accountable for four of Milford's twelve runs, and he had driven in three others. Bloomsburg ended the game with a total of five runs, so Watkins had defeated the enemy single-handed despite his erratic fielding. Stuffy had contributed two singles to the day's work and Brick, batting in the clean-up position, had come through with a triple.

CHAPTER XVI

AN ATTEMPT TO RIGHT A WRONG

COACH DOLAN said nothing to his players after the game. He did come into the locker-room and look about as if he had planned to say something, but he apparently changed his mind. The players were glum enough as it was. They knew that, despite a fairly effective attack, their play had been rough and their defense woefully weak. Watkins' dropping of two pegs at second had served to make the team lose confidence in itself as a unit. It was not sure of its infield. That exuberant attitude of reliant aggressiveness was lacking. The players somehow felt that they could not yet depend upon one another. It was a feeling that they could not explain . . . a sort of consciousness that they were rather awkward individuals out on the field by themselves instead of part of a team. The same aloofness now made itself felt in the dressing-room. Each player sought to get off by

himself; there was no attempt at association; each one took a shower, dressed and got out with as few words as possible.

Pepper, one of the first dressed, waited outside the locker room for Stuffy and Brick to put in appearance. There was a determined look about him. He started when he saw Watkins emerge and come toward him.

"I say, Watty," called Pepper, his face coloring.

The veteran second baseman, seeing with whom he was confronted, side-stepped and started to pass on without giving a sign of recognition.

Impulsively, Pepper reached out and grabbed Watkins' arm.

"Just a second, please!" he begged. "I'm sorry about this afternoon. I don't want you to think . . ."

Watkins shook off Pepper's hand roughly.

"Don't want me to think!" blazed Watkins. "Well—I do!"

"But it wasn't any of my doings!" insisted Pepper. "I didn't put them up to it. I didn't even know until . . ."

"Tell it to Sweeney!" broke in Watkins, angrily. "You fellows cooked up a scheme to queer me when the coach picked me instead of . . ."

"I admit it looks that way," persisted Pepper.

"But I'd rather quit the team than have you think I . . ."

"Razzberries!" scoffed Watkins, starting on.

"I'm waiting to see Stuffy and Brick now," the despairing Pepper sought to explain, "and I'm going to tell them . . ."

"A lot you're going to tell anybody!" flung back the enraged veteran. "I know your kind. Some just like you on last year's team. You don't care whether Milford wins or loses—just so you get what you want. Well—nobody's going to make me the goat again . . . so tell your friends to watch out!"

Watkins strode off. Pepper took a few steps after him, then—realizing the hopelessness of trying to convince Watkins otherwise—he stopped, whirled about, and beat his clenched fists against his sides.

Stuffy and Brick left the locker-room together. They were not exactly satisfied with the outcome of the game and of the playing of one individual in particular.

"If only he hadn't gone on such a batting spree," lamented Stuffy, "then those three errors would have made him look like a fish."

"He sure was hitting 'em to-day," agreed Brick.

A figure loomed up before them out of the gathering dusk.

"Hello, Pepper!"

"Hello, yourselves!" The tone was pungent with feeling. "Come on down this side street. I want to have a talk with you."

The three chums moved along silently, with Stuffy and Brick eying each other wonderingly.

"Well, what's up?" asked Brick, at length.

They paused in the shadow of a great tree which had pushed a part of the cement sidewalk up in its climb skyward.

"Just this!" said Pepper, wheeling upon his two pals with a suddenness that startled them. "You thought you were helping me out by—by trying to show up Watty. But you weren't. You were just making me out a . . . a poor sport; worse than that—a . . . !"

"Whoa, there! Wait a minute!" interrupted Stuffy, surprised. "What are you driving at?"

"Now don't pull that innocent gag on me!" Pepper laid a hand on Stuffy's shoulder. His voice softened; the other hand went out and gripped Brick's arm. "Pals, you meant all right, but you did all wrong. That isn't the kind of loyalty that . . ."

"How could we help it if Watty dropped our pegs?" asked Brick, defensively. "You're not blaming us for that?"

The anger died out of Pepper's voice, but there was a knife-thrust in his answer. "Fellows, you know darn well that if I'd been in there I couldn't have caught those pegs, either. You didn't intend for Watty to catch 'em!"

"Well," said Stuffy, defiantly, "we couldn't throw wild or we'd have been blamed if he had missed. The only way to make him get the error was to put the ball where he should have caught it."

"But the speed, man! You fairly burned it to him. And that isn't the point anyway. You were taking an unfair advantage. Do you think I'd want to make a place on the team by discrediting another fellow? I thought what Hoops said to us one day had soaked in. Guess you didn't take what he said to heart after all. But I did!"

"What do you mean?" asked Stuffy, pointedly.

"That we can't be for Milford if we're for ourselves. I used to think we could be for ourselves, too. But we can't. Why, some time ago Watty came to us and offered to help us any way he could, just because he thought we were all going to make

the team. He wasn't considering himself at all. All he was thinking about was Milford."

"Don't you believe it!" said Stuffy, hotly.

"But I *do* believe it," returned Pepper. "He was on the square, and he thought we were on the square. But how did we treat him? We started being 'uppish' right away and naturally got his dander up, and then, when he was chosen instead of me, you fellows—no doubt thinking you're doing me a good turn, hatch up a scheme to put him out. You weren't thinking of Milford then. You . . ."

"It was perfectly safe," objected Brick. "We were seven runs ahead."

"Seven or seventy—the principle's the same!" said Pepper. "And now that Watty's wise . . ."

"What?"

"Watty wise?"

"Certainly! And I think Hoops is, too! I tried to talk to Watty when he came out, but he wouldn't listen to me. He accused me of being in on the idea. Said he knew our kind. That he wasn't going to be made the goat again this year the way he was last. He was mad clean through . . . and he had a right to be."

Stuffy kicked at the tree trunk and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Let him rave!" he said, grudgingly. "He wouldn't dare tell any one that we were responsible for his errors. They'd think he was trying to offer an alibi."

"He might dare," said Pepper, quietly. "But I don't think he would. He's too decent. If he fights back he'll fight fair."

"I guess you don't want to get on the team very bad," taunted Stuffy.

"No—not very bad," replied Pepper, with a voice that choked up strangely. "Not after having done everything with you fellows for what seems years and years. But I've changed a little bit somehow . . . and I was hoping you had changed, too. Remember, Stuffy, when I asked you in fun if you would cut your right arm off for me?"

Stuffy nodded, eyes upon the ground. Brick shifted his feet uneasily.

"Well—I don't know whether you'll understand what I mean by what I'm going to say. Stuffy—Brick—old pals, you've cut off your arms for me, but you've cut off the wrong arms! And it didn't do me any good. It's done us all harm."

For a long time there was nothing said. The three stood, shuffling thoughtfully, awkwardly, under the cloak of darkness that the great tree had

folded about them as the sun's last rays crept down behind the horizon.

"It's getting late," said Stuffy at last. "Mother'll wonder what's keeping me."

"I've got to be getting home, too," echoed Brick, glad that the silence was broken.

The two started to move off, but stopped as Pepper hung back.

"Come on, pal," called Stuffy. "We get what you mean . . . and you're right . . . as usual."

"Don't say that," begged Pepper. "I'm just . . ."

"Say—we've still got the right arms left!" suggested Brick with all the enthusiasm of a new idea. "If we'd cut them off would it make things o. k.?"

"Yeah—would it?" asked Stuffy earnestly.

"It all depends what you cut 'em off for," said Pepper. "If you could just make it up to Watty some way so he'd see you were honestly trying to play fair. And if we could all prove that we're not for each other so much that we can't be all for Milford. Then maybe . . ."

"I'll start cutting my right arm off in the morning," broke in Stuffy. But in about ten minutes I'm going to use it to eat with. Let the future take care of itself!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE FLAME OF FEELING GROWS

DISCERNING eyes at the opening game of Milford High's baseball season detected the plotting against Don Watkins—veteran second baseman—by the two Freshmen infielders. The few who thought they noticed the attempt to force Watkins into errors, held their tongues until the following day. Then, when it was observed that Watkins was no longer on speaking terms with Owen and Mitchell and that he also spurned Lawton, the man he had beaten out for second base position—then, ah, then!—folks felt that they had a right to talk.

Ugly rumors spread. Of course, it was plain to see why Stuffy and Brick should want to get Watkins in bad. It was all a scheme to force Pepper Lawton, the third member of the Freshman combination, on the team. The shortstop and first baseman had figured that Coach Dolan would feel called upon to remove Watkins if the veteran looked bad

enough in the field. And in the sixth inning, when Bloomsburg scored runs, three directly responsible to Watkins' errors, it had seemed as if the efforts of the Freshman pair might be successful. But through the orgy of error-making, two dropped throws and a ball which bounded between Watkins' legs to the outfield, Coach Dolan sat unmoved even though the rooters roared, "Put Pepper in!" That the coach's faith was justified was shown in Watkins' response at bat. The very next time up he hit a home run to deep center, scoring a man ahead of him. In the following times at bat he made a double and single.

What the outcome of this new kind of rivalry would be was a subject for conjecture. Members of the team, approached on the subject, appeared surprised. Some said they hadn't noticed anything unusual; others immediately branded the rumor as false; still others just wouldn't talk. Coach Dolan himself gave no indication that he was aware of the feud.

Milford students and townspeople, attending the practice sessions for the next few afternoons, were disappointed. They saw a team taking itself seriously; working hard under the pointed guidance of the coach; and indulging in no personalities. True,

Stuffy and Brick seemed to hold somewhat aloof from Watkins, and the second baseman paid little heed to them—but the plays were generally well executed and nothing occurred to give evidence of more spite work. Occasionally Pepper was substituted for Watkins and then the spirit of the infield was observed to pick up appreciably; there was instantly a livelier round of chatter, such as "Atta boy!" and other cries so common to the ball diamond, where before the combination had worked in comparative silence.

"The trouble's still brewing," declared Slim Mooney, the school wit, "only it's brewing under cover!"

Milford's game with Navin City, its second opponent, proved little or nothing . . . except that Milford had a strong team in the making. As far as throwing any more light upon the Freshmen versus the veteran second-sacker, the game was a failure. Watkins played the entire nine innings; made one bobble on a hard try and turned in three hits out of five times up. He was batting like a fiend. Milford incidentally won the game by another top-heavy score, 17 to 2. Hoops Miller had breezed along, winning under wraps. Oh, boy—wait until Milford stacked up against some nines

with a "rep"—what Miller wouldn't do to them this year, the way he was going!

Harwell High, Milford's first real test, felt the finely drawn edge of Miller's pitching, going down to defeat before him, 3 to 0, after waging a valiant battle. Again it was Watkins' batting that stood out, his hits being responsible for two of the three runs. Pepper got in at second base for the first of the ninth, but no chances came his way, as Miller put two batters down on strikes and the last popped weakly to Brick.

Now the season began to settle down for a grind of evenly balanced games—games that would call upon all the developed resources of Milford High to win. And now, too, folks began to look forward to the yet distant game with Reedland—the last and biggest game of the year. This was the season of seasons when Milford wanted most to win! Hoops Miller, regarded by all as Milford's greatest pitcher, was passing out of high school. Three other varsity men would play their last game on that day as well, but not so much sentiment was attached to this fact. "Win for Hoops" became the slogan and the team began to work with that end in view. From the talk that was going the rounds, all of Milford intended seeing the game, while early reports from Reedland

made it appear that this town would move its dot on the map to correspond to its rival's for the day . . . a quite conclusive showing that the big contest meant much more to both parties concerned this year.

One night after practice, when the squad was gathered in the dressing room, Ted Rath—veteran fielder and team cut-up—came across a package of cigarettes that the janitor had left on a window-sill. Knowing how strict were Coach Dolan's training rules and seeing a chance for some real fun, Rath playfully slipped the cigarettes in a side pocket of Watkins' trousers, these trousers being the nearest to him. Watkins, at the time, was under the shower and Rath winked at the few players who witnessed the trick.

"Let's kid him when he comes in," he said.

It so happened that Pepper's locker was next to Watkins', and Pepper was sitting on the bench preparatory to undressing when the veteran second baseman put in an appearance. There was an air of restrained mirth in the room with Rath soberly warning those who were "on" to keep their faces straight.

As Watkins picked up his trousers, Rath pretended to spy something suspicious sticking out of the pocket.

"I say, Watty, what have you got there?" he asked.

Watkins had been rather sullen for weeks, paying little attention to any one since the fall out with the Freshmen. He was not in a very pleasant mood now. At sight of the telltale package his face went white with rage.

"Cigarettes!" drolled Rath. "Why, Watty, I'd never have thought that of you. Better get 'em under cover before the coach catches you with 'em or it's all up with you!"

"These aren't mine!" stormed Watkins, excitedly. "Somebody's tried to frame me. I haven't smoked in . . ."

"Now don't try to feed us anything like that," broke in Merle Conway, catcher, "I guess we caught you with the goods!"

The boys were enjoying Watkins' discomfiture immensely.

His indignation growing, Watkins glanced about the locker room, striving to see if there were some one upon whom he could fasten the guilt. His eyes stopped at Pepper, who had not been taking part in the fun-making. Pepper sat upon the end of a bench a few feet away, tying his shoes.

"See here, Lawton, you're the one that did this!"

accused Watkins, holding out the package of cigarettes. The veteran made a hilarious picture, standing forth with his shirt on and the tails hanging down, trousers crumpled across one arm and the other arm raised aloft with the cigarettes.

Pepper did not answer. He did not even look up. Stuffy and Brick, coming in from the shower wrapped in towels, stopped to inquire what it was all about.

"Watty thinks I planted those cigarettes in his pocket," Pepper informed in a low tone.

"Sure he did!" fumed Watkins. "He'd do anything—that fellow!" The veteran wheeled about to face the other players who no longer considered the matter a joke. "Pepper's plotted with his two pals to beat me out for the team—and not being able to do that—now he's trying to get me in bad with the coach!"

It was a fierce denunciation. All eyes turned to Pepper to see how the Freshman would take it. Stuffy and Brick started forward angrily. Pepper held them back; he stepped up close to Watkins and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"I know you have good reason to believe you weren't treated fairly in the past," said Pepper, slowly, "but you're taking a little too much for

granted when you try to fasten anything like this on me."

"I'll say you are!" put in Rath, now eager to clear everything up; "I planted those cigarettes myself!"

"You!" said Watkins, rather weakly.

"Yes—just a little joke," explained Rath. "And it wouldn't be a bad idea if you apologized to Pepper."

The veteran stood fingering the package for a moment, crestfallen. Then he hurled the cigarettes to the far corner of the room and proceeded to finish dressing. Pepper waited a moment, then turned quickly away. The atmosphere was tense as Stuffy and Brick completed dressing, every now and then shooting bitter glances at Watkins. When the two Freshmen had shuffled out to join Pepper, Watkins broke the silence.

"It's not Lawton's fault; he didn't put those cigarettes in my pocket," said the veteran. "He just didn't think of it first—that's all. And he wouldn't have done it for fun either!"

A hot wave of protest followed Watkins' declaration. The players generally resented this insinuation.

"I'm surprised at you, Watty," reproved Rath. "You'd better have left that unsaid even if it was so

—which it isn't. I'm warning you right now that it won't be exactly healthy for you to make a crack like that again!"

The two veterans glared at one another. Watkins' face turned a deep red; he spun about on his heels, slammed his locker door shut, twirled the combination and strode out of the room.

"Gee, it's a good thing for Watty that Hoops Miller left early," said Rath, greatly relieved. "What he would have told that bird would have been a-plenty!"

News of such an incident is bound to creep out. The three Freshmen were regarded curiously and considerable interest was aroused any time any one of them chanced in the vicinity of Don Watkins. Rumor had it that the breach had widened until it would soon require action by the coach. Those concerned could no longer ignore the trouble which now actually threatened to disrupt the team.

Stuffy, Brick and Pepper held a secret conference over the affair.

"You could cut off six right arms and it wouldn't do you any good with Watkins," complained Stuffy. "He's just as unfair now as we were. He won't make up; he's suspicious of every move we make and he's started to talk."

"Little thanks we got for playing square!" sniffed Brick.

"That's all right," argued Pepper, "but we mustn't forget that we were to blame in the first place. And here's where we're being put to the test. We've got to come through, no matter what Watty says or does. I really didn't think he'd talk—but as long as he's under the impression we've got it in for him I suppose he feels justified in hitting back at us any way he can."

"He couldn't bury a hatchet if you dug the hole for him," said Stuffy. "At that, I think he would like to—but his pride just won't let him."

"Well, it looks like we've got to finish the season with him on the infield," declared Brick. "And there's no denying the fact that Watty can play ball." Here Brick made a slight bow to Pepper. "I meant no comparisons," he added, eyes twinkling.

"I've told you all along that Watty was a better player than I am," insisted Pepper. "That's why it's a shame this whole mess had to happen!"

"You tell 'em!" endorsed Brick. "Because a better player doesn't help much when he's at outs with other members of the infield . . . or we're at outs with him—to make things fifty-fifty!"

Almost before Milford realized it, the week before the big game with Reedland had arrived. Up to this date, Milford High had carried through the most successful season in history, winning from every team—in most cases by comfortable scores. Credit for the winnings went to Hoops Miller without dispute. State papers lauded Miller as a high-school pitcher without a peer. Be that as it may, Miller's head remained unturned and his arm continued to baffle all who opposed it. The largest number of runs that had been scored off Miller in any one game was four. He had pitched three shut-out contests and it was conceded that he could have twirled several more shut-out games had the occasion demanded.

Reedland had a pitcher named Neil that they declared could stop Miller. While Reedland had also gone through the season undefeated, their games against some of the same teams that had competed against Milford were much harder contested. Sport authorities pointed to this basis of comparison to show Milford's superiority, but Reedland strenuously asserted that one could prove nothing by statistics. Wait until the game!

Slim Mooney, using his wits to advantage, had started a campaign to insist upon Miss Frillmood's

attendance at the game. A petition was written and signed by every student in Milford High which read:

We, the undersigned, do hereby urge upon Principal Pomeroy the necessity of a 100 per cent attendance at the Milford-Reedland game as a mark of school spirit.

To that end, we petition you to invite Miss Frillmood, in charge of your office, to witness the aforementioned and forthcoming contest.

It is our understanding that Miss Frillmood has never taken any interest in athletics during her long period of employment and that she knows nothing about sports.

That being the case, it is our contention that her education has been sadly neglected. We shall expect to see her at the game this year should she have to be brought by force!

(Signed)

It was surprising what an amount of interest the circulating of this petition had aroused. The news of it got into the town paper and was the cause for much humorous comment together with speculation as to whether the students would actually be successful in getting Miss Frillmood to witness the game

On the Thursday before the Saturday clash, Coach Dolan ordered the gates closed to all spectators, so that the team could be put through an intensive practice drill without anything to divert their attention. Friday afternoon the team was to rest and it was the coach's aim to whip the squad into top season form in this last, all-important workout.

"I have something to say to you before you take the field to-night," said the coach as the players gathered about. "This has been a great season, as you all know. You boys have played a better brand of ball in every game. Saturday you should be at your very best. But no matter how good a team may be in the mechanical elements of the game, unless every fellow holds the right mental attitude toward the other, games like the one we are to play with Reedland cannot be won. Such games are usually so closely contested that the slightest break decides them.

The coach paused a moment and looked about the circle of faces. Some heads dropped so that eyes would not be compelled to meet those of the respected mentor.

"I have not been unmindful of certain hard feelings that have existed since the first of the season,"

continued the coach, with a simple directness. "And I have made no mention of it before because I thought those who entertained these hard feelings would be men enough to put them aside. A few of us can remember what it has meant to Milford to carry hard feelings into the battle with Reedland . . . and our memory does not have to go any further back than last year. I regret that I have to speak of this. It has been my policy to let you fellows settle your own affairs and I do not intend to take a hand now. So if any of you think that the satisfying of personal grievance means more than victory for Milford, go ahead and betray your fellow teammates who are giving their all for the finest old high school in the world!"

Coach Dolan's eyes dimmed; he jerked at his cap impulsively and turned away. It was a good minute before any one of the players moved; they stood, gripped by what he had said; some searching their hearts a bit fearfully to see if the coach had meant them; others shamefacedly staring at the ground.

"Take the field!" ordered the coach. The first team players jumped at his command like lively young colts at the lash of a whip.

Coach Dolan concentrated on the infield work,

seeming not entirely satisfied with the efforts of Owen, Watkins and Mitchell. It was growing dusk when the coach finally placed his stamp of approval on the combination by a nod of the head.

"One more time around!" he called.

That "one more time" was destined to prove costly. Bond, batting to the infield, slashed a drive down to Brick at first. The lanky first baseman raced over, bristling with pep, made a dazzling pickup and straightened to throw to Watkins at second. Watkins, running for the bag with an extra burst of speed to end the practice session, reached the base before he had calculated. In some unaccountable manner the cleats of his right shoe caught in the base strap and he tripped and fell headlong. The ball shot over him into left field. There was a laugh by all who saw the tumble, but the laugh quickly died out when Watkins failed to rise and lay writhing on the ground.

"My ankle!" he groaned. "It feels like it's broken!"

Coach Dolan was by Watkins' side in an instant. He ripped the shoe-strings loose, jerked off the shoe and rolled Watkins' sock down. An angry puff was rising just above where the shoe top had been. The coach's practiced fingers felt the ankle.

"Just a sprain," he announced, shortly, "but a bad one."

Anxious hands bore Watkins to the bench and the veteran was rushed away to receive medical attention almost before the players had time to realize the shattering consequence of the happening.

"Lawton," said the coach, turning to Pepper, who stood nearby rumpling his glove, "we're going to need you. I'm sorry, but the infield is called for another workout at 10 A. M. to-morrow. Every one excused for to-night!"

The day of the game dawned as clear as the weather prophets had predicted. There was not a cloud to mar the sky and the roads to Milford, particularly from the direction of Reedland, were jammed with motorists. An excited, joyous throng jostled up and down Main Street. Mike's Light Lunch Counter was doing a flourishing business, in hot dog sandwiches. Stuffy, Pepper and Brick, roaming about early in the morning, looked at the hot dog munchers enviously—especially Stuffy.

"Gee, and I can't have anything like that until to-night!" he said, smacking his lips longingly.

"There you go—raving about eats again!" scolded Brick.

"I've got to rave about something," defended

Stuffy. "You made me stop raving about Pepper's getting a chance to play. . . ."

"Say—how is Watkins this morning? You heard?" asked Brick.

"Not much better," answered Pepper. "I dropped by to see him on my way down and he . . ."

"You what?" exclaimed Stuffy and Brick together.

"Why not?" demanded Pepper. "I feel sorry for him. It's genuine hard luck to be cut out of the last big game you can ever play for your school."

"Yes, but he got just what was coming to him," said Stuffy, not so inclined to be sympathetic. "Which goes to show that a fellow can't do anything wrong without getting it in the neck sooner or later."

CHAPTER XVIII

STUFFY TO PEPPER TO BRICK

ALTHOUGH the big game was scheduled to start at two o'clock, the bleachers and sidelines were crowded with spectators shortly after one. A large space in the grandstand was reserved for the student bodies of Milford and Reedland. The visiting school was the first to occupy its space, bringing a band and a wild gang of rooters. But Slim Mooney, who had taken over the title of yell leader, parade marshal and stunt originator in addition to his recognition as school wit, had something rather big up his sleeve.

Presently the sound of auto sirens, followed by the blare of the Milford High band, was heard outside the high board fence surrounding Brinkley field. The spectators came to their feet as the gates swung open to admit a strange procession.

Leading the parade was the inimitable Slim and behind him were students pushing wheel-chairs. The boys had actually succeeded in getting some of the

town cripples out and in filling other chairs with citizens who had not been in the habit of attending athletic contests. The band followed, wearing hats with drawings of baseballs on the sides. And then—well—when the spectators saw this—they screamed!

Squire Bottoms' old automobile buggy, the first horseless carriage to ever put in appearance in Milford! Somehow, the class in motor mechanics had overhauled the contraption so that it wheezed along under its own power. And—sitting beside Principal Pomeroy—was Miss Frillmood, in all her dignity. She glanced neither to left nor right but stared straight front and swayed stiffly backward and forward as the rubber-tired vehicle sputtered along. On the sides of the buggy hung banners upon which the following was scrolled in black lettering:

FOLKS, MEET MISS FRILLMOOD!

She's Here, But She Doesn't Know
What It's All About—

JUST TO PROVE THAT MILFORD IS
100 PER CENT BEHIND THE TEAM

The stands roared with laughter and Milfordites explained to visitors the significance of the parade.

Five minutes before game time, while Hoops Mil-

ler was conferring with Tim Jordan, center-fielder and captain of the Reedland team, a commotion started on the Milford bench.

"Look who's coming!" exclaimed Morris Fitzgerald.

Hobbling along on crutches, but in uniform, the figure of Don Watkins swung through the crowd about the bench. While his teammates looked on, astounded, he laid aside the crutches and limped over to a seat, his right ankle heavily bandaged and supported by a brace.

Coach Dolan, sitting at the far end of the bench, never so much as glanced toward the new arrival.

"What you doing here?" asked Fitzgerald, surprised.

Watkins grinned happily.

"Coach said I might turn out." The grin faded and the veteran bit his lips. "It's my last game with old Milford, you know . . . and it won't hurt me . . . sitting on the bench."

The stands resounded with cheers; the air was quivering with excitement. Stuffy looked at Pepper and Pepper looked at Brick. This was to be their day at last and the three chums were feeling the strain of it. Miller was the only one who did not appear affected. He took the din very calmly,

reached over and patted Watkins on the knee, took a sip of water from the pail, then beckoned to the team.

"All right, fellows. We take the field first. Let's see lots of snap to-day!"

Coach Dolan did not believe in saying anything to his team just before the game. It was his theory that it tended to make them too conscious of what was to come . . . too strained and nerved up. So he sat motionless as his charges raced out upon the diamond with a vim that was beautiful to see.

The welcome that the nine got! Everywhere a mad sea of waving caps, arms, flags! There was a roar as Hoops Miller wound up and whizzed the first ball across for a clean strike.

The first Reedland batter hit on the second ball pitched, a tap down the third base line which Fitzgerald fairly ate alive. The runner was out by six feet. The next batter went down on strikes, trying vainly to connect with a ball that never came where he was expecting it. The third batter sent up a puny fly that Miller stood in his tracks and caught. Side out! Hoops had retired Reedland's first assault with ridiculous ease. He was in superb form.

"There's no beating that boy to-day!" called out a spectator, confidently.

The Milford team trotted in to the bench, the first wave of excitement over, with a better hold on themselves. There was an eagerness to sort over bats.

"All right, Ted, old boy, smack it on the nose!" entreated Stuffy to Rath, first man up.

"Wait it out," ordered the coach. "Make him pitch to you!"

"Yes, sir," said Rath, on his way to the plate. "I'll see what I can do."

Milford soon found out that Neil, Reedland pitcher, was something of an enigma himself. Rath came back to the bench trailing his bat. He had waited the pitcher out as instructed, but Neil's control was perfect. After spotting Rath three balls, Neil pulled out of the hole by putting over three that Rath couldn't touch.

"He's got some stuff!" Rath reported, as he threw down his bat.

"Hit the first ball pitched!" said Coach Dolan to Stuffy.

Stuffy did, and popped a foul that the Reedland first baseman gobbled in.

Pepper, taking Watkins' position in the line-up and batting order, was next. Coach Dolan did not advise him. Pepper was most lacking in experience

of any of the players. He would do better out on his own.

After letting two balls go by, Pepper swung at a fast in-shoot and caught it on the end of his bat for a low, arching fly that dropped safely over third base.

"Good boy!" shouted Watkins, starting up impulsively from the bench.

"Give him two to go down on," the coach said to Brick, as the long-geared first baseman picked out his bat.

The Milford rooters were cheering Pepper for getting the first hit of the game. Pepper took a good lead-off and dashed for second on the first ball pitched to Brick. The play was close but the umpire ruled Pepper out. Side retired; first inning over; no runs for either team.

The innings began to stretch out, with both pitchers twirling remarkable ball. Second—third—fourth—fifth—the first of the fifth and the score still nothing to nothing! "Some game!" every one was saying. Thus far each side had succeeded in gleaning but two hits off the opposing pitcher. Milford had come the nearest to scoring—a man on third in the third inning with two men out. And it was Pepper who had fallen down in the pinch. The

stands roared for the substitute second baseman to come through with another hit. He was favored to do it, having gotten to Neil for one safety. But Pepper either felt the strain too much or the Reedland hurler found a place where the batter couldn't hit them—for Pepper struck out!

And now Reedland was at bat the first of the fifth—badly baffled Reedland, wondering how long Hoops Miller could go on mixing such blinding speed with such a bewildering change of pace and such a deceptive drop!

Tim Jordan, Reedland's captain and heaviest hitter, was first up. The Reedland supporters took occasion to start cheering for a rally.

"Give us a hit! Give us a hit!" they chanted.

Jordan responded with a surprise drive—a drive that whizzed the ball on a line right back at the man who pitched it. Miller saw the ball coming and just had time to stick out his bare hand at it. He succeeded in knocking the ball down in some miraculous sort of way. Pepper came charging in to back up Miller, but the Milford pitcher recovered and made the throw to first, although Jordan crossed the bag two strides ahead of the ball for an infield hit. Both Reedland and Milford joined in giving Miller a great hand for his plucky stop of a smash that was

tagged for the outfield and two bases at least.

Miller took his time about pitching to the next batter. He stood in the box, his pitching hand lying in the palm of his glove, covering the ball. Finally he stepped out of the box and nodded to Merle Conway, his catcher. Conway walked out in front of the plate to confer with him. This procedure was an unusual one for Miller. It set the fans wondering. Conway looked down at the bare hand resting against the baseball glove. He conversed with Miller in low tones and presently turned, both pitcher and catcher going back to their positions. The fans sat back, relieved. For a moment they had thought something might be the matter.

The first ball was intended to be high so that the batter could not bunt and sacrifice Jordan to second . . . but instead, it came across just above the waist and the batter gleefully dumped it in front of the plate. Conway grabbed the ball up and threw the runner out at first by yards, but Jordan steamed into second standing up. Coach Dolan leaned forward on the bench and stroked his chin.

A man on second and only one out! Reedland began yelling for a score.

Again Miller pitched and the ball was wide—so wide that Conway just managed to get his hands on

it. Jordan started for third, but scampered back to second in a hurry when he saw Conway's quick bit of retrieving.

"Wow!" yelled a Reedland enthusiast, "Miller's going up!"

It did look as though Miller had suddenly lost some of his effectiveness when he could not find the plate on his next two pitches. Three balls and no strikes!

Miller leaned down and rubbed his pitching hand in the dirt. His next pitch cut the plate for the first strike and Milford roared. The batter only grinned and took a firmer hold on his stick. His hit, a moment later, whistled through the infield like a bullet —into right field. Jim Hemming took the ball on the bound and whipped it home with all the speed he could command. The peg was true but a trifle late, the ball smacking into Conway's big mitt just as Jordan slid across the pan—safe—while the batter galloped on to second on the play. Reedland had scored on the great Miller! Several varieties of concentrated noises broke out.

"Every one hits to-day!" sang out the Reedland coacher on the third-base line. "Come on, Rudie!"

Rudie tried to come on with a bounding wallop to Pepper, who fielded the ball cleanly and, seeing

that he could catch the runner heading for third, flashed the pellet to Fitzgerald for a tag out. It was a nice play, and Milford breathed easily once more.

The next batter also caught the ball on the nose with what looked like a sure hit, but Ted Rath connected with it in deep center after a hard run, retiring the side. Milford trotted in to the bench with Reedland one run in the lead.

As soon as Miller got in he went straight to Coach Dolan and held out his pitching hand.

"Isn't that tough?" he asked. "Look at that thumb!"

The coach looked, and thereupon added some more white hairs to the tufts over his ears.

The thumb was red and swollen. Moreover, it was still swelling.

"What I got for trying to stop that drive," said Hoops.

The other players crowded around, sober and downcast.

"Here's some iodine!" offered a substitute.

"Nothing doing!" snapped Miller. "Think I want Reedland to know I've been hurt?"

Hal Bond, Milford's only hope as a relief pitcher, sat biting his finger-nails nervously.

"Can you go on?" the coach asked Miller.

The pitcher moved his thumb warily . . . and winced.

"I can try," he said. "I—I'd like awfully much to finish. It'll be up to the gang behind me though. I'll need all the support they can give me. No more curves; no more change of pace; just straight, fast balls—and let's pray for a little control!"

A cheer went up as Conway caught one of Neil's twisters and poked it through short for a single.

"Come on, bunch," pleaded Watkins. "Let's get that run back for Hoops!"

"I'm next up!" exclaimed Miller, snatching a bat and rushing to the plate. Milford gave their idol an encouraging hand.

"Win your own game, Hoops!" an admirer shouted.

But Hoops did all that should have been expected of him. He sacrificed Conway to second on a bunt that Neil fielded and threw to first. The head of the batting order was up again and things looked promising. Ted Rath tried desperately to produce.

"Any kind of a hit will do!" encouraged a rooter.

Ted slashed a high fly that the shortstop caught after dancing about uncertainly under it for a few

frenzied moments. Two out, a man on second, and Stuffy up.

"All right, Owen, here's your chance! Tie the old game up!"

Stuffy toed the plate determinedly. He swung hard on the first two pitches but never so much as ticked them. Milford groaned. A ball. Then Stuffy scratched a hit to right that the Reedland first baseman should have captured had he been playing as far off the bag as was consistent. The Reedland rightfielder, playing close in, fielded the ball so rapidly that Conway—rounding third—was called back on his try for home. The chances seemed too much against him.

Now Pepper was up—and in another pinch! two down and men on first and third. With teammates entreating him to win the game, Pepper fouled two balls into the grandstand.

"Straighten one of those out!" begged the Milfordites.

"Two balls and two strikes. . . . Pepper set himself for the next pitch. It was a fast ball. He swung with all the force he could command. The ball plunked into the catcher's mitt for the third strike. Pepper had fallen down for the second time

when the measliest sort of a hit would have saved the day.

"What wouldn't we give for Watty in there?" Pepper heard a spectator remark, as he tossed aside his bat and went out to his place for the beginning of the sixth. The tears came to his eyes.

"Never mind, buddy, there's still time," encouraged Stuffy, crossing over from first.

Pepper kicked the dirt up in a despairing cloud. A note of discouragement was beginning to creep into the team. Their two golden opportunities to score and . . . !

Reedland's turns at bat in the sixth, seventh and eighth innings provided a series of nightmares for Milford. Hoops Miller, invincible up to the fifth, appeared to have cracked wide open. Reedland was getting to him with an attack that threatened to bombard him off the mound. And Reedland knew that once the great Miller was driven to cover, they had nothing else to fear. Only inspired fielding saved Milford when it seemed that all was lost. In the sixth it was Rath's shoestring catch of a low line-drive that cut off at least two runs; in the seventh Pepper went out in the grass to field a blazing grounder and retire his man at first by an eyelash for the third out, preventing a certain score; in the

eighth it was Brick's stop and throw to the plate that caught a Reedland runner flat-footed, trying to score on the hit.

But while Milford was giving the failing Miller gilt-edged support in the field, it was falling down miserably at bat. Neil, Reedland pitcher, had the entire Milford team eating from his hand. Encouraged by Miller's slipping, Neil had grown stronger as the innings progressed and he put the Milford batters down in order throughout the sixth, seventh and eighth. Quite a feat in itself!

"I guess you'll have to tape that thumb," Miller said to Coach Dolan as the players took the field for the start of the ninth. "That swelling interferes too much with my gripping the ball."

"But they'll get wise," suggested the coach. "You've gone this long . . ."

"Can't help it," said Miller, grimly. "I've got a little speed in reserve. I think I can get through this inning if they do find out!"

Hanging to the lead by the narrow margin of one run is too slight an advantage to crow about even though the game is almost over. Reedland was eager to turn some of the hits it had been getting into runs. And now was the last chance to do it. Milford was still dangerous.

When Hoops Miller held up his pitching hand, every one knew instantly the reason for his—until then—quite unaccountable loss of form. The thumb was wound with tape. The umpire looked the injured member over and called to Jordan, Reedland captain, to ask if he approved. Jordan nodded. The crowd appreciated the nerve that Miller had shown under fire and gave him a round of applause.

Reedland, confident now that Miller had nothing but a straight ball, went out to clinch the game. The first batter singled; Miller passed the next one trying to keep from putting the ball where he could sacrifice; the following hitter tapped a drive down to Fitzgerald who fumbled in trying for a force out. All hands were safe—three men on and no men out!

"Put the game on ice!" shouted a Reedland rooter, mercilessly. "Knock him out!"

Not far from the Milford bench, Hal Bond—relief pitcher—was warming up. The coach had not sent him out until Miller had taped his hand.

The infield gathered about Miller for a short conference.

"They're getting to me," said the veteran. "We've still got a chance if we can pull through this. What do you say—shall I give way to Bond?"

The players glanced toward the plate. Jordan,

heaviest hitter on the Reedland team, was swinging three bats and smiling from ear to ear.

"I doubt if Bond could get out of this hole with any less damage than you can," judged Conway. "I move you stick!"

"Righto!" assented the other teammates.

Miller turned back to the mound with his lips set in resolution. Little beads of nervous perspiration stood out upon his forehead. He took a last look about the infield—an appealing look—a look that said plainer than any words, "Boys, it's all up to you. I'm done!"

Jordan stepped into the first pitch with a swinging stride. There was a sweet-sounding crack—sweet-sounding for Reedland. The ball flashed on a line between second and third. Three runners dug their toes in the dirt and started on a merry chase about the bases.

"It's a hit!" the crowd shrilled.

No one will ever be able to tell accurately what happened in the few pulse-beating seconds that followed. But somehow the lightning figure of a half-crazed youth, running backward, turned and leaped upward, flinging out a gloved hand. And the flashing white of the ball disappeared within it. The figure, sprawling over backward in a sitting position,

took in at a glance the scurrying runners. Without waiting to rise, Stuffy hurled the ball in the direction of second base. Another youth, as crazy as the first, reached out eager hands to grab it. The runners now had stopped in their tracks and were going into reverse with all possible speed. The throw to second was wild and Pepper had to make a wilder leap for it. He, too, pulled the ball out of the sky and took a few lunging steps to tag the bag with his toe. Then he shot the ball on its way to first in a frantic attempt to beat the runner on the way back to that bag. The throw again was wild—this time low and at the side. Brick, hooking his foot under the bag, threw his body out and away—stabbing at the ball as it struck the ground near him. He fell to earth as the runner slid into the bag—but the ball had jumped into the outstretched glove and stuck. Half-way home from third, the base runner had tagged the bag and was again headed for home—but too late. The side had been retired.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FELLOW WHO FORGOT SELF

A TRIPLE play!

And *such* a triple play!

It transformed Milford High from a team, faltering on the brink of abandoned hope; a team beaten back by the decreasing effectiveness of its star pitcher; a team made disconsolate by the failure of certain batters to produce, when hits meant runs; a team, slipping—yet giving ground slowly, stubbornly—until Reedland, no longer to be denied, had filled the bases in the ninth!

And then that triple play—pulling Milford back on an even footing, restoring lost confidence, inspiring hope! A team, transformed by one brilliant infield sparkle, into joy-maddened, victory-craving, claw-tearing tigers!

Stuffy, Pepper and Brick were literally mobbed by the substitutes as they made their way to the bench. Never had such excitement prevailed on Brinkley field!

Watkins, forgetting his injured ankle, was up on his feet, hugging each of the Freshmen in turn—while Coach Dolan . . . ! the coach just sat, impassive, looking straight off into space at the wildest of demonstrations, tears trickling down his cheeks.

Fight? Did Milford have it?

"Come on, gang! After that play we can't let Reedland win this game! They're only one run ahead. It's our last chance!" begged Watkins.

Reedland felt the change in Milford's morale. Even Neil, who had turned his rivals back with only four hits, looked nervously toward the Milford bench where players were hysterically tossing bats into the air. From the way they were carrying on, one would have thought they had won the game instead of going into the last half of the ninth one run behind—and that one run looking as big as the side of two mountains!

Merle Conway, Milford catcher, was first up. Teammates slapped him on the back as he started to the plate. Every one in the stands was on his feet; the din was almost ear-splitting. Conway rubbed his hands in the dust and stepped into the batter's box, taking a short grip on his bat. The Reedland pitcher prepared to put every ounce of effort into his pitches.

The first ball sung across the corner and Conway swung.

"Strike one!"

On the Milford bench players held onto each other in an effort to suppress their excitement. A moment later they were dancing and throwing caps and rolling on the ground. Conway had ripped a single straight over second base! The tying run on first and no one down!

Hoops Miller, fussing with the tape on his thumb, hurried to the plate. The uproar increased, if it were possible.

Hoops let a ball and a strike whizz by. He picked out the third pitch and bunted it down the first base line. Conway shot into second standing up while Miller, tearing for first, was thrown out by a hair.

One down and the tying run on second. Chance for an over-inning game!

Ted Rath, who had starred in the field but whose work at the bat had been sadly lacking, entered the box.

"Come on, Ted, here's what you've been waiting for!" urged a Milfordite.

The center fielder nodded as if in answer, pulled at his cap, and set his spikes in the dirt.

He hit—a wicked bounder in the direction of shortstop. The Reedland infielder made a flashy pickup and whipped back his arm for the throw to first but held the ball just an instant to see what the runner on second was going to do. This slight delay was fatal, as Rath—running like the wind—beat the ball to first by a step, and Conway, taking advantage of the peg, slid safely into third.

Milford fans were now about ready for the crazy house.

The tying run on third; the winning run on first and only one man down!

As Stuffy Owen ambled to the plate, his eyes gazing out over the diamond as if picking out a place to drop a hit, Pepper paced nervously up and down. He bit at the knuckles of his left fist as he saw Stuffy foul the ball on a curving drive down the right field foul line.

On the next pitch, Rath dashed for second base and made it easily, the Reedland catcher fearing to throw because of the man on third.

"A little single now means two runs!" some one sang out.

Stuffy tried hard to produce . . . but Neil had too much stuff on the ball for him. His hit went

almost straight up in the air—one of the "mile high" kind. It started dropping between second base and pitcher's box.

"All mine!" called the second baseman.

A long, sighing groan escaped the lips of the Milford rooters while a great shout went up from Reedland supporters as the Reedland second sacker clasped the ball to his shirt front. He handed it back to the pitcher with a confident assurance.

"All right, old boy, only one more!"

The Milford base runners crouched on the bags —snarling tigers—straining at their leashes—eager to be off for home!

Over on the Milford bench a strange thing was happening. A youth, tears streaming down his face, was appealing to the coach.

"Please, sir, let Watkins bat for me! I tell you, the Reedland pitcher's got my number. My only hit was a fluke. He's struck me out the last three times up. Watkins hit good all season . . . he . . ."

The veteran second baseman stood just behind the substitute. There were tears in his eyes too.

"It's my chance to make up for last year," he said. "Won't you . . . ?"

Coach Dolan looked toward the field and then back at the two players.

"Play ball! Batter up!" roared the umpire.

The coach waved his hand. Pepper sank down on the ground, digging his trembling fingers into the dirt, the tears dropping on them like rain. Off toward the plate hobbled the veteran second baseman, swinging a black-polished bat.

"Yea, Watkins! Yea! Yea! Yea!" bellowed the stands.

The Reedland nine watched the pinch hitter's approach with a feeling of awe. There was something chilling in the sight of a fellow going to bat who could hardly stand; a fellow who walked as if each step would be his last.

The Reedland catcher went out to talk it over with his pitcher. Watkins, even in his present plight, was a batter to be respected.

Putting on a burst of blinding speed, Neil flung the ball across the plate, shoulder high. Watkins swung, turning half-way around in his effort to connect, almost falling to the ground. He steadied himself.

"Don't try to kill it!" begged a nervous spectator. "Just meet it. That's all you have to do—meet it!"

Watkins grinned. A grin coming at such a time was hardly natural. It worried the Reedland pitcher. Neil put the next ball on the outside but the veteran did not bite. Ball one!

A beautiful in-shoot, curving over the heart of the pan, went for a second strike when Watkins did not offer to swing at it. The Milford stands groaned.

Pepper, babbling incoherently, was just one of the whole team—every player begging, crying, shouting—doing all manner of odd things and not caring . . . intent only upon . . .

The Reedland pitcher, with the count two strikes and one ball, decided to outguess the veteran and slip across another inshoot for a third strike and the game.

Somehow every one felt as though this was to be the deciding pitch. The spectators leaned forward as Neil raised his arm and the ball sped on its way to the plate.

Watkins, throwing full weight upon his injured ankle, took a short, quick step forward and brought his bat around in a black flash.

The wild-eyed tigers, on third and second, scampered for home with express-train speed. Out in right field, the Reedland right fielder was running

with his back to the plate and glancing furtively up over his shoulder. He made a frantic leap into the air after a round white object that was bound for the Brinkley field fence. Then he came to earth and continued to run after it.

Stumbling down the first base line was a figure that reeled like a drunken man and gasped at each step . . . an eye on the base which seemed miles away and the other eye watching the flight of the ball. When the right fielder failed to touch it by some ten feet, the gasps of pain gave way to happy, lurching sobs.

On the mound, the Reedland pitcher stood, chin resting on chest, listening to the clatter of the second pair of spiked shoes as they crossed home plate . . . the clatter that brought defeat to him in the most hair-raising contest ever played!

Reaching first, the pinch hitter fell upon the bag and hugged it. He did not have to go any further. His drive would ordinarily have been good for three bases.

Stuffy, Pepper and Brick were among the first to lay hands upon him. And by the light in their eyes all could tell that everything was all right.

Over on the bench, Hoops Miller—his heart's

desire realized—sat fingering the tape on his pitching hand, too happy to move. Coach Dolan, sitting next to him, put an arm around the big fellow's shoulders . . . and Hoops put his head down and cried.

But while this was going on, and before the stunned spectators could find voice to cheer, a piercing shriek rang out. Every head turned in the direction of the sound.

Standing on the seat of Squire Bottoms' old horseless carriage was the disheveled figure of a woman.

Miss Frillmood had found out what it was all about! And then the joy-maddened Milford throng unloosed its feelings in a booming roar. But the yell which was given with greatest enthusiasm was:

"Yea, Big Three, Yea!

Yea! *Yea!* YEA!"

Stuffy, Pepper and Brick, happy beyond words, could only look at one another as they were carried off the field on the shoulders of jostling Milfordites. For the three friends had sensed the new meaning in the word "Big"—a meaning which no one else would ever fully appreciate perhaps—but a meaning which came home to them with gripping force. "Big Three!" *Big* not so much because of anything spec-

tacular they had done, but because of victories won over themselves—victories requiring a kind of fight never found on the gridiron or diamond—but victories counting even more in the winning of games than the little they had done on the field.

(1)

THE END

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